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MUSTANG MERLE, THE BOY RANCHER;

Or, OLD JOE BUNDY'S WIPE-OUT. ♣ ♣ By MAJ. SAM S. SCOTT.



THE BOY RANCHER'S BEAUTIFUL HOME WAS NO MORE! THE RED JACKETS HAD DONE THEIR WORST.

Mustang Merle, THE BOY RANCHER;

OR,

OLD JOE BUNDY'S WIPE-OUT.

The Romance of Lost Ranch.

BY MAJOR SAM S. SCOTT.

CHAPTER I.

MEETING A THREAT.

It was near the close of what had been a matchless autumn day and the sun was shining his last upon the tallest spurs of the Guadalupe Hills.

Through a little valley of mesquite and oak, with the heads of their horses turned toward the New Mexican border line, rode two persons, a boy and a man.

Both were well mounted, but the youth had the better animal. It was a large black mustang, strong of limb and handsome. The eyes were full of fire, showing that the horse was capable of great things, and he traversed the valley with those eyes ever on the lookout.

The other steed was a dark sorrel, higher by a full hand than the mustang, and not so fresh. His flanks showed that he had been well ridden that day, and, then, he had a good weight in the saddle, a tall man with a Yankee sort of countenance, a beaming, good-natured eye, and a strange companion for the youth who rode at his side.

"We shall see 'the promised land' when we have left the valley," explained the boy who was seventeen, well built, handsome and dressed in the garb of a rancher. "We will get a view of it from yon hill, and now let us gallop for I am anxious to show you Mesquite Ranch with the sun upon it."

The youth spoke with pride and the two urged their steeds into a gallop and soon reached the summit of the hill.

"Down yonder is my kingdom," exclaimed the boy, pointing toward a group of ranch buildings standing in the center of a little grove of cedar. "That is to me the fairest place on earth."

He turned to look at his companion and while he did so a smile made still brighter his face.

The man, who was old enough to have been the boy's father, seemed to have been struck dumb by the striking view displayed to his gaze.

"I've never seen a prettier place in all my born days," he asserted. "I've been round somewhat—have roughed it all over this kentry and nearly everybody in it has heard of Joe Bundy, but hang me for a raider if you haven't a real boner fider paradise here."

"Away to the north where the horizon is fading from sight is the New Mexican line. Yonder are the Guadalupe Hills where they say my old friend Captain Red Jacket is in hiding, and down there runs the Little Silver where my cattle get the best water in these parts. So you see I'm pretty well situated."

"I should say so," answered Bundy, without taking his eyes from the scene which had enraptured him, though it did not seem that there was a particle of poetry in his rough nature. "By Jehosaphat, I wouldn't mind dyin' here when my time comes. But what's that dark line yonder? It seems to be moving."

The outstretched hand of the speaker indicated a moving something dark of hue which was slowly making its way toward the west, or toward the ranch buildings.

"I presume that 'line,' as you call it, is one of the herds being driven in by my boy Kyd."

"You have to watch them closely, don't you?"

"Rather," smiled the boy. "You know we have Captain Red Jacket always on the lookout—Captain Reddy, the ranchmen call him, and up and down the Rio Grande he is known as Captain Cussed."

"Captain Cussed? Indeed! I've heard of the critter!" cried Joe Bundy. "Why don't you settle him?"

"That is easier said than done," was the reply. "He has been quiet of late; indeed, he has never molested me."

The man said nothing more for a moment but continued to survey the scene below.

"How long have you been here?" he finally asked.

"Three years. I lived with Captain King, the owner of Mesquite, and when he died—he was killed by a man supposed to be this very

Red Jacket raider, Captain Cussed—the whole ranch fell to me as a legacy from my employer. Six months ago there came to the ranch a young girl named Lona, a distant relative of Captain King's and she shares the house me. We are pretty well fixed for defense, still a lot of scoundrels like those led by Captain Red Jacket, and called the Red Jackets, might inflict great damage upon the property of Mesquite Ranch, but they might have to pay for their deviltry."

The boy's eyes got a quick flash while he spoke, and Joe Bundy nodded and said he would like to "take a hand in the scrimmage," and that he felt "jest like tannin' somebody's jacket."

"I get along well with the 'Paches," continued the boy, looking toward the north where the Apaches lived. "We have never had any serious trouble. They carried off some horses the first year of my proprietorship, but we followed them and took the steeds back with compound interest."

"Jest like you, I'll bet. Wish I could have helped you," added the other.

"We'll go down now. I'm a little hungry and, then, I want you to see all the attractions of Mesquite Ranch."

Joe Bundy was willing to quit the hill as though what he had seen had but given him an appetite for more, and in a short time the twain were riding toward the group of houses.

The boy's horse now pricked up his ears for he knew he was within sight of home and in a few minutes the two rode through an avenue of well-trimmed cedars and halted in front of a house with a long veranda in front.

"This is my home and you are welcome to it," spoke the boy, flinging one leg over the saddle-bow and springing lightly to the ground.

"Thankee," was the response, "but I knew that from yer face. I kin read character pretty well if I am no phrenologist."

As the youth touched the ground there appeared upon the porch a young girl who ran to the edge and waved her hand to him.

"That's the head angel o' paradise, I'm sure," exclaimed Bundy, lifting his sombrero to her, and receiving in return a smile and a pretty bow.

"Lona, this is Mr. Bundy whom I ran across on the homeward trail," announced the boy, with a wave of his hand toward his companion.

"Not Mister Bundy, but jist Old Joe," corrected the tall man. "I discarded that prefix long ago and I don't take to it now. I'm simply Joe Bundy, a rolling stone on this mundane sphere, and all the moss I've picked up you could put into yer pretty eyes, miss."

The girl laughed, displaying two rows of pearly teeth.

Joe Bundy now dismounted and stepped upon the porch where he saw a young man take charge of his horses.

"Where's Kyd?" asked the boy rancher.

"He went down the creek to look after the stock," said the girl.

"I haven't been away long have I, Lona?"

"Not very, but we were anxious about you," was the reply.

"What, have you—"

Mustang Merle, the young ranch king, checked himself and looked away.

"I think Kyd has some news for you," said the girl. "At least he appears to be exercised about something. It is a secret from me at any rate."

Mustang Merle invited Bundy into the house which, to his surprise, he found furnished in excellent style, and bidding the queer old fellow be seated, Merle went out and walked toward the stables.

He did not stop there but passed them by and went down through the long grass of a little meadow and stopped when he saw a dark figure moving toward him from the south.

He waited there until the figure came up, when he held out his hand to the young man who had joined him.

"I'm glad you got back safely," cried Kyd Kemble, the overseer of the Boy Rancher's property.

"What, had you any fears for me?"

In reply Kyd ran his hand into his bosom and brought forth a bit of discolored paper which he handed to the young rancher without opening.

"That may mean something," said he, watching his young master unfold the paper.

"Where did you get it?"

"I found it upon the big bowlder down in the gorge this morning. I have not shown it to any one, preferring to keep it for your inspection."

"That was right, Kyd. I am glad you did not show it to Lona, though I'm afraid she suspected something."

"I am almost sure she did," smiled the over-

seer. "I'd like to see you hide anything from her sharp eyes."

Then he watched Merle while he tried to decipher the poorly traced characters on the paper.

"It's a threat!" suddenly cried the Boy Rancher, his cheeks flushing and his eyes flashing up again. "It's a threat from Captain Red Jacket, the scoundrel. He wants to levy tribute upon us, Kyd."

"That's it in plain English," was the response.

"He wants an answer left where this paper was found and between now and morning."

"Yes, sir."

"He shall be gratified. He shall have his answer. The old prairie brigand won't come for it himself—I'll wager my best horse on that. He wants three thousand dollars left where he shall designate, or he will burn Mesquite over our heads, and sow the ground in salt."

The young overseer said nothing.

"Let's go back to the house now," continued the Boy Rancher. "I want to answer this scoundrel. I think I can give him as plain English as he has sent us."

The two turned and walked back to the house, Mustang Merle mentioning that he had brought home a visitor, one who might remain with them indefinitely.

"We may need Joe Bundy, as you call him," said young Kemble. "We are not as numerous as we might be, but numerous enough, I trust, to cope with Captain Cussed and his Bravos, in case they should undertake to carry out their threat."

Mustang Merle, with his lips welded in determination, walked through the room where Lona was charming Joe Bundy with a spirited description of life on the ranch, and entered a little apartment where he slept.

There he opened a desk and seated himself in front of it.

Taking up a pen he dipped it into the ink and wrote for a second, and when he threw the pen aside these words glistened on the sheet before him:

"CAPTAIN RED JACKET:—You haven't salt enough to sow one square yard of Mesquite Ranch."

"MUSTANG MERLE,
The Boy Rancher."

CHAPTER II.

THE CAMP OF THE Foe.

BY this time night had come and lights gleamed in several places on the ranch.

When Mustang Merle emerged from the little room where he had penned the defiance to Captain Cussed, there was not a single trace of excitement on his face.

Greeting Lona and Joe Bundy again, he passed out and met Kyd Kemble on the porch.

"Take this back," said he, handing the young overseer the brief letter. "Place it exactly where you found the threat and come back. I will see that we are ready for the Red Jackets when they come."

Kemble took the paper which had been simply folded, not sealed, and walked away.

He crossed the little meadow lying beyond the stables and made his way toward the creek that ran through the ranch. Beyond it still stretched a deep gully which at one time had been the bed of a rushing torrent, and when he entered it he placed one hand upon his right hip as though he half expected to see some one spring upon him from among the dark shadows thrown by the rocks on either hand.

The young man picked his way to a spot about the middle of the ravine where he found a huge stone which had been displaced from the right-hand wall by some convulsion of nature and there he stopped.

Not a sound broke the stillness of the scene. Far above him shone the stars, showing him the ghostly rocks that hemmed him in.

What a place for an ambush! What a fine target he afforded any desperado or Indian hunter of scalp; but he did not fear the latter, for the nearest Apaches were far to the north and had not bothered Mesquite Ranch for some time.

Kyd Kemble now took from his bosom the letter he had brought to that lonely spot.

He placed it upon the big stone and laid a smaller one upon it to weight it down.

"There's your answer, Captain Reddy," remarked the overseer, speaking aloud. "I don't think it's the kind you want, but it means just what it says. If you want three thousand dollars from Mustang Merle you'll have to fight for every penny of it. We don't allow ourselves to be bled by any one, much less by a pack of border thieves of the sort you command. Come for

your answer whenever you want to. I leave it for you here."

He drew off and went back up the gulch.

A few yards from the spot he came to a sudden halt, as if he had caught the sound of something suspicious, and the next moment he leaned against a dark rock and looked back toward the spot where he had left the defiance.

He now saw something darker than the grayish sides of the gulch walls. It looked like the figure of a giant, such as were taller than the tall in the days of old, but he knew that the ravine after night made things look larger than they really were, and he smiled to himself while he watched the apparition.

He saw it approach the very rock where he had left the letter.

It was the figure of a man and it leaned over the boulder and picked up the paper.

This much the young overseer saw and when the figure glided from the spot he laughed to himself again.

"The letter did not remain very long in the post-office. You are very anxious for an answer, captain. Be careful that you don't get more just like it."

The Red Jacket had now disappeared and, eager to see more, Kyd Kemble ran down the ravine as fast as his legs could carry him, and, finding a narrow path which led to the top, he scrambled up and listened on the high ground.

Presently he heard the gallop of a horse, and then for a moment caught a glimpse of a dark object moving away, and he knew that the rider of that steed was bearing to Captain Reddy the letter from the Boy Rancher.

The overseer waited until he could no longer hear the rapid galloping of the horse, when he turned toward the ranch again and walked home.

"That reply was waited for," he announced to Mustang Merle whom he joined near the house. "A messenger was in ambush for it and even now it is being borne to the raider's camp."

"I'm glad of that," replied the young rancher. "The sooner the better. I am not seeking a collision with the Red Jacket Bravos, but I don't propose to show the white feather. They have levied tribute on other ranches, but they sha'n't upon mine. I would sooner apply the torch to old Mesquite than pay this rascal one dollar to save it."

Let us follow the horseman speeding over the ground with the Boy Rancher's defiance in his pocket.

He was a man who seemed fitted for the very business in which he was engaged. The dark face he owned was covered with a stubby black beard, above which gleamed a pair of fierce eyes; he was habited in half-buckskin, the leggings of which were fringed clear to the ends, and in the belt that encircled his waist were prominently sticking a brace of revolvers.

There was no doubt that this man was one of Captain Reddy's Bravos, and the way in which he urged his horse told that he had no feeling for animals.

He rode like the wind for some miles and then began to slacken his speed. Since quitting the gulch he had covered a great deal of ground and now seemed to be near his journey's end.

Turning suddenly to the right the man rode across a small valley well bushed and appeared abruptly to a lot of men lying around several camp-fires on the other side.

"Monte!" cried several voices as he was seen, and then a fine looking man arose and stood in the light of the middle fire.

Toward this personage the rider rode and took from his pocket Mustang Merle's letter which he extended with a grin.

"Thar she is!" said he. "I didn't have ter wait long."

The personage who had risen took the letter and stepped back to the blaze.

The twenty-odd men who were gambling when Monte rode up now suspended operations and watched their chief, for he was the man who had received the answer.

Captain Reddy was as eager as his companions, for he leaned over the blaze to peruse the missive.

It did not take him long to master the brief contents of the defiance, and before he spoke his men read the nature of it by his countenance.

"Well, we've got to teach the young fool a lesson," said the prince brigand.

"What does he say?" queried a dozen voices.

"Read the answer. Let us hear how brave he is when the enemy ain't in sight," and the chief proceeded to read the young rancher's reply.

For a second a singular silence overspread the Bravos' camp, then a wild shout was uttered

by some one and the following moment the whole lot was in an uproar.

"We're rather glad he's sent back such an answer, cap'n," cried one. "Mesquite's the richest ranch in these parts and there's loot enough there to make us all cavaliers."

"Beauty and booty," said another. "I've seen the latter for myself, an' I know—"

This sally was greeted with boisterous laughter, for the speaker was the homeliest man among the Red Jacket Bravos, and even their captain joined in the merriment at Pecos Pete's expense.

"When shall we teach them that we aren't to be bluffed?" now asked a dozen voices.

"Before long," was the reply. "I sha'n't keep you long from the booty, you can depend."

"Not to-night, captain?" queried a good-looking man of thirty-five—Dolores Dick, the second in command of the raiders.

"No, Dick, not to-night," replied the chief.

Having answered his lieutenant, the raider prince walked away and retired to a spot where he would not be disturbed by the looks of his men.

For some years this man had been the terror of the Texas border. He seemed to bear a charmed life, and nearly every one appeared afraid of him and his men—the Red Bravos, as they were called.

They plundered those ranches which did not yield tribute to them, and some of the best estates in that country were fast becoming bankrupted under the merciless drain levied by this desperado and his band. He led, at the opening of our story, about twenty followers as desperate as himself. Some of these were broken-down miners, who saw that raiding and levying tribute on the rich ranches paid better than gold-hunting; others were desperadoes pure and simple, and not a few had committed innumerable crimes.

Captain Reddy himself had at one time been a person of some note in another part of the country; but now he was nothing less than a raider, and the leader of one of the worst bands that ever cursed our southwestern border.

He had long had an eye upon Mesquite Ranch, and had thought of levying tribute upon its young owner. Day by day he had seen the boy's herds increase, had watched his lands yield a thousand-fold, and, like the hawk, had waited for the time for the swoop.

It had come at last. His men had clamored for the raid, but he had shaken his head, telling them in his peculiar language that the "plum was not quite ripe." He was waiting for a time when he should know that Mustang Merle's treasury was well filled, and the recent sale of some fine cattle had filled it to overflowing.

Hence the letter he had sent to the rock, knowing that every day Kyd Kemble, the young overseer, went through the gulch on his way to one of the confines of the ranch.

For some time he remained away from the gamblers around the fire. When he came back into the light he was seen by Dolores Dick to whom he nodded, and the lieutenant rose and joined him.

"We'll open the campaign to-morrow night, Dick," said the captain. "I want to teach this fool Boy Rancher a lesson he will never forget."

Dolores Dick smiled, showing how eager he was to have a hand in the teaching.

CHAPTER III.

QUEER PROCEEDINGS.

WHILE these events were transpiring in the camp of the prairie brigands, Mesquite Ranch was getting a new visitor, and he was near at hand.

Across the rather level stretch of country lying to the north of Mustang Merle's home a horse was speeding through the night making rapid headway under the brilliant stars.

He was headed for the ranch, and when he reached a certain hill from which could be seen the lights glowing there, his rider rose in the stirrups and looked down upon the scene.

"Red Hawk is almost at the house of his young white friend," said the person in the scanty saddle. "He hopes he will find Merle at home, for he has something to say to him, and, then, he would like to gaze again upon the face of the pretty white bird of the pale-faces."

The speaker was an Indian—a lithe young fellow who sat his steed with the grace of a born Centaur. His garments were half civilized, but in his long black hair, which was as straight as an arrow, he wore the tail-feather of the large hawk of the South.

Halting for a moment on the crest of the rise,

he resumed his ride, passing down into the valley and then across it to the very door of Mesquite Ranch.

Drawing rein there he leaped to the ground and, leaving his horse untethered, ran across the porch and burst into the parlor unannounced.

"Jericho!" exclaimed a voice, and a man sprung up, and, retreating a pace, half drew a revolver.

"It's only Red Hawk," interposed the young girl, who put forth her hand and gripped the speaker's wrist, while she looked into his eyes and did not try to restrain her merriment.

"Bless me if I didn't think it was the advance guard of the 'Pache nation!" answered Joe Bundy. "Only Red Hawk, eh? Wal, I'm tarnal glad it ain't the whole swarm of 'em."

By this time the young Indian, who had taken in the situation, was shaking hands with Mustang Merle, and then he paid his respects to Lona, looking deep into her dark eyes and silently drinking in her fresh beauty.

In a little while the Indian seemed perfectly at home, and was talking with the occupants of the room, Old Joe joining in with vivacity, though he seemed to view the young red-skin with some suspicion.

By-and-by Red Hawk made a sign to the Boy Rancher and the following moment they left Lona and Joe to continue the conversation while the two youths withdrew to the open air.

"The serpent is going to take the trail," said Red Hawk, speaking in low tones.

"We have just heard from him, replied Merle.

The young Indian looked astonished.

"How?" he cried.

"Why, Kyd this day found his threat down in the gulch, and I have just answered him. If Captain Reddy comes he may not find us unprepared for him."

A sudden light seemed to dawn upon the Apache.

"Red Hawk is not thinking about the Red Bravo," said he quickly. "He did not mean him when he said the serpent is about to take the trail."

Mustang Merle gave his friend a sharp glance full of questioning, for he could not conceive to whom the Indian had referred.

"Red Hawk is talking about Gray Eagle."

"Oh, the young fellow I ordered off the ranch last summer because he chose to be insulting toward Lona?"

"Merle has not forgotten."

"What! does he contemplate revenge?"

"Gray Eagle has brooded over that day ever since it went," was the response. "He has received a letter from his friend in these parts and he knows just how things are upon my white brother's ranch."

"Who would write to that rascal?" demanded Merle, flushing with indignation.

"Ah, that is it," and Red Hawk's voice sunk to a whisper. "That is what has puzzled Red Hawk while he rode to the ranch. You must have a traitor under your roof, Merle."

The Boy Rancher fell back, a cry of incredulity upon his lips—a cry suddenly checked.

"Tis impossible, Red Hawk!" he said when he had grown calmer. "It cannot be that I have a spy—a traitor, in my camp. For once you are mistaken."

A smile overspread the handsome face of the young red-skin.

"Which of your hands have been away during the last few days?" he asked.

"I have been absent myself for two days. I must question Kyd before I answer you."

"Kyd, the overseer?"

"Yes."

Red Hawk ran one hand into his bosom and feeling there for a moment produced a bit of paper which he handed to Merle.

"This is what came to Gray Eagle," said he. "Red Hawk stole it from him at the risk of his life."

"Is it the letter that will unmask the traitor if there be one in the camp?"

"Let Merle look."

Mustang Merle struck a match and opened the paper which was quite small. The Indian watched him closely and saw him read the writing revealed with welded lips and almost colorless face.

"What thinks Merle now?" he asked quietly when the Boy Rancher had thrown the match to the ground with a half-uttered curse.

"I would not have thought it," he said, the words seeming to come through shut teeth. "I don't want to believe it, Red Hawk. There may be some mistake here—some terrible mistake."

He crumpled the paper in his hand and did not speak for some time.

"When did this message reach Gray Eagle?" he asked at length.

"Last night."

"Did you see the bearer?"

"No, I only knew that Gray Eagle had it by hearing Dick, the White Apache, read it to the young chief. Then I stole it."

"I thank you, Red Hawk, but you have driven the iron into my soul," said Mustang Merle with feeling. "Just now we are menaced by the Red Jackets. We may expect Captain Reddy and his desperadoes at any time, and they far outnumber us. If Gray Eagle comes on a trail of vengeance, we will be between two fires. And with a traitor among us, too!"

The young Indian fell back, and looked in silence upon Mustang Merle.

"Keep the secret you have," said the young rancher at last. "Let us be its only sharers for the present. Do you think Gray Eagle will come?"

"He told Dick that he would swoop down upon you like an eagle in the dark, and pay you back for the way you served him last summer. He never forgets, Merle."

"Will he come alone?"

"He may, and he may come with a dozen warriors. There are young bucks who would rush through fire at Gray Eagle's beck."

Mustang Merle hid the letter, which was very brief, in his bosom, and turned back to the house. It was evident that he had recognized the writing, and that this was what had caused the sudden start, as though it was a piece of terrible evidence against one whom he implicitly trusted.

Not a word passed between Merle and the Apache until the porch was reached. There the Boy Rancher told the Indian to rejoin Joe and Lona in the house, while he turned away and walked toward the stables.

"Chip?" he said, stopping at an open door, beyond which all was dark.

"Here I am, Merle," cried a merry voice, and the next moment a boy of fifteen sprung out as nimbly as a cat, and halted before the young nabob.

"You were at home last night, Chip?" said Merle.

"That I was."

"When did you go to bed?"

"Not till very late, seeing that you were absent. I thought it best to watch a little on my own hook, for there's no telling who is prowling 'bout a rich stake like Old Mesquite."

"Chip, were any of the boys away yesterday?"

"None but Kyd, sir."

Mustang Merle started.

"When did he go off?"

"Just after sundown."

"And came back—"

"Twixt midnight and day."

Merle was watching the face of the boy before him, and he must have seen that it bore the impress of truth. He had never caught Chip in the slightest falsehood, and now his words seemed to carry every vestige of color from his face.

"Remember, Chip, not a word about this."

"Not a word," echoed the boy.

Chip was permitted to go back to the bed in the stable, while the young rancher walked toward the house.

All at once he stopped, and stood like a statue near one of the trees that grew between house and stable.

Something had moved on his left, and he was almost sure that he saw a crouching figure ten yards away hugging the ground like a catamount.

Mustang Merle leaned toward the object and looked with all eyes; at the same time he half drew a revolver and kept his hand upon the trigger-guard. The object had now become stationary, and while he looked it grew more and more like a human being.

After watching it for a spell, Merle took a step toward it, when it moved and began to roll over and over, all the time getting further from him.

The rapid antics of the object rendered aim uncertain, and though Mustang Merle tried to cover it with the revolver, he refrained from firing, and at last the thing rolled behind a tree, where it suddenly vanished.

"A tarnal funny thing, that, wasn't it?" said a voice near by.

The owner of Mesquite wheeled round in a jiffy and looked at the speaker.

There stood Joe Bundy holding in one hand a six-shooter, and bare-headed, and almost as tall as the cedar beside which he stood.

"I've been watchin' for a spell myself, an' ef

you hadn't come up when you did, I guess I would have given it one o' Doctor Bundy's pellets. The patient never needs more than one," grinned the old borderman.

CHAPTER IV.

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

OLD JOE, as he spoke, came forward and joined Merle.

"What do you think it was?" asked the young rancher.

"Half human, half panther," smiled the old man. "But to me it looked a little more than half human."

"How long had you been watching it?"

"Nigh onto ten minutes. I left Red Hawk an' Lona talking in the house an' came out for a stroll. About the first thing I saw—I ginerally carry my eyes with me—was that thing crouchin' thar by the tree. Of course I fell ter lookin' at it, an' when it saw me it never moved, but kept perfectly quiet. What do you think?"

"I hardly know what to think," said Merle.

"A spy, eh?"

Why not tell the old man all? Why not make a confidant of him, and tell him his suspicions and all about the message he had sent to Captain Reddy.

Mustang Merle resolved to do this, and taking Old Joe's arm, he led him through a back door into the house.

There he told him everything, and had the best listener he had ever seen.

"Enemies on the outside an' traitors within, eh?" cried the old man. "That's pretty tough, but we've got ter stan' it. I guess we're equal to the emergency. You kin count on Joe Bundy, though he ain't what he used ter be. Still—"

The old fellow stopped and went to the nearest window where he began to listen, watched closely by the Boy Rancher.

"I thought I heard something out thar," said Joe, coming back and taking the chair he had vacated. "My ears hardly ever deceive me, but they may have played me a trick this time. You haven't rats about the ranch, have you?"

"I haven't seen a rat about the house for a year. If you heard a noise it might be worth investigating. We must be on the alert now."

"Does the gal know?"

"No, but I fear she suspects danger."

"We ought ter ferret out the traitor. It ought ter be done soon, before he gets in any of his dirty work. We can't afford ter fight Captain Red Jacket an' his gang with a traitor in the house."

"You are right, Joe. We must discover this man."

Five minutes later the figure of a human being might have been seen crouching under the very window at which Old Joe had listened. It was the figure of the old borderer himself and he was examining with his sharp eyes the starlit ground underneath the sill.

"It wasn't rats," muttered Joe Bundy. "Here's a footprint which I'd bet my noggin wasn't here at sundown. Somebody war at the winder when I heard the noise. Now if I could but track him!"

The ground was soft enough and there was light sufficient to enable the old man to follow the footprints some distance. They went round the house toward the front porch and there he lost them as they had reached grass.

"I've an idea that Merle kept jest one thing back from me," continued Joe. "He seems ter suspicion a certain person, but he didn't breathe a word as ter his identity. Now, it seems ter me that he ought to have let the hull cat out o' the bag, but that's his business, he thinks, an' not mine. I haven't seen all the hands yet for I haven't been here long enough, but when they are mustered for duty as they will be in a few minutes I may get a squint at the traitor."

Joe Bundy went back into the house to learn that Merle had carried out one of the decisions of their conference. He had sent for every one in any way connected with the ranch and in a short time all were congregated in the parlor. As it had been decided to keep the menacing peril from Lona no longer she, too, was there, wondering what meant this nocturnal caucus.

Mustang Merle told his men concerning the threat which Captain Red Jacket had sent to the ranch, and acquainted them with the nature of his reply. His brief answer was received with hearty applause, led off by Kyd Kemble, who, in turn, narrated his trip to the gulch, and how the reply had been snapped up by a bandit in waiting for it.

Guards were told off and assigned to duty. They were cautioned to exercise the greatest vigilance, as it was not known how soon the Red Jackets would swoop down upon the place.

Everybody present seemed eager to meet the brigands of the Southwest and to give them a warm reception which should teach them that tribute could not be levied on one ranch in that country.

When the conference was over Mustang Merle approached Old Joe Bundy and the two walked into the boy's private-room.

There was a gleam in the old man's eyes.

"You have made a discovery?" said the young nabob.

"I don't know," answered Joe, doubtfully. "I don't like ter be too sure o' anything. I had my peepers open during the confab an' took 'em all in. You've got some good-lookin' chaps on the ranch an' a few I wouldn't want."

"I've found all faithful up to to-night," was the reply. "Which one is the traitor?"

"The fellow with the long hair."

"Why, that's Rustling Rob, the trustiest man I have on the ranch," exclaimed Merle.

"I can't help what he is. Benedict Arnold was thought a great deal of at one time, yet he played Washington an' the hull country a scurvy trick. I have a pretty good eye. I compared the tracks I saw in the ground with the boots the young fellow wears an' they seem ter match. Besides, I don't like these long-haired chaps, nobow."

Merle could not repress a smile at Old Joe's aversion, but he was not convinced that Rustling Rob was the traitor. If he had had a secret duty for one of his hands—a duty upon which might depend the safety of the whole ranch—he would have intrusted it to this very man, and now Old Joe thought him the black sheep of the flock.

He recalled what Chip had told him—that Kyd was the only one absent from the ranch the previous night. If this was true, Rustling Rob could not be the traitor.

When the conference between Joe Bundy and the young owner of Mesquite had come to an end, Lona glided into the room and found Merle alone.

"What is this Red Hawk has hinted to me?" said the girl. "He has asked me if I have ever heard any threats from Gray Eagle, the Apache, whom you ordered off the ranch last summer. Now that he has asked me such a question, and we are on the verge of a raid which may be quite serious, I want to tell you something I have kept to myself. Two weeks ago while I was walking over the little pasture toward the creek, drinking in the beauty of the night, and not thinking of any one being near, I was startled by a human figure. It stood near the water's edge and I happened to see it before I was observed. Stepping back to where I could be sheltered by a tree, I watched it and saw it joined by another."

"It seemed to me that the first person seen was an Indian, but I laughed at the thought, for I know that the Apaches are far to the north. In a short time the two persons were talking in low tones and I watched them until they were through, for to have moved meant discovery, the very thing I did not count. When the conference had come to an end the twain shook hands and separated, one moving off toward the hills, the other going back to the ranch, from whence he had come. I followed him but at a respectful distance and in time saw who he was."

Here Lona paused as though she would have kept back the rest of her narrative, but Mustang Merle was looking into her eyes and she felt it her bounden duty to proceed.

"That person was Kyd Kemble," she said slowly, "and I was never so surprised before. I made sure that he was the person I had seen near the creek, for I did not want to think him guilty of any sort of treachery."

"Why did you not mention this before?" asked Merle.

"I did not want to create a scene, and then I sometimes doubted the very strong evidence of sight. I could hardly believe him guilty, but I fear he has been playing double."

In a moment the face of the young rancher grew doubly serious. The girl saw a flash of stern determination in his eye and when he spoke again his voice was scarcely his own.

"This shall end to-night. We will rid ourselves of this traitor at once. When his confederate comes to carry out his scheme of revenge he shall not have him to help it on. Where is he now?"

"What are you going to do?" cried Lona. "If he is the traitor he may have tampered with the others."

"Then all with whom he has tampered shall follow him!"

Mustang Merle passed from the room leaving

Lona there with a white face and speechless. She heard his footsteps on the porch and then they suddenly ceased.

The Boy Rancher went down through the little court in front of the house and came rather suddenly upon a figure under the cedars.

"Where's your horse?" he said.

The figure turned upon him and gave him a singular stare.

"Jet is in the stable, I think," was the reply.

"Take him and ride."

Kyd the overseer was standing in front of the young rancher and astonishment filled his eyes.

"Ride whither?" he cried. "That's a funny order."

"I don't care where you ride to," was the quick retort. "Perhaps, though, you should best ride to your red friend."

"To my red friend?"

"To Gray Eagle, the rascally Apache," cried Merle. "Go, sir! The game is up. The mask has been torn from your face. You can go to the red villain you have served. If your steed is in the stable take him and ride."

The Boy Rancher turned from the young fellow standing statue-like under the stars and walked toward the house.

Kyd Kemble took one mad step after him but halted suddenly.

"I will go," said he. "I will obey you, for I have always done so, but I am no traitor. I serve no man but Mustang Merle. Within the past month my clothes have been worn by some other person, that I know."

There was no answer and neither spoke again until the Boy Rancher almost collided with Joe Bundy near the house.

"Well, Joe, I've just rid the ranch of its traitor," exclaimed Merle.

"You have, eh?"

"I have just commanded Kyd Kemble to ride to his master, Gray Eagle, the Apache."

"Then, by hokey, we've still got the traitor among us! You've sent the wrong one off."

The young owner of Mesquite Ranch shook his head and smiled.

CHAPTER V.

THE CYCLONE COMES.

THE following day was passed in active preparation for the expected danger.

The arms of the ranch were carefully looked to and the house transformed into a veritable fort. The herds were sent to graze as usual, but their watchers were cautioned to be on the lookout and to report any signs of danger they might see.

The day waned and night once more settled over the face of nature. The heavens, studded with stars until they looked like a vast diamond field, stretched in cloudless beauty above the ranch, and Mustang Merle and his friends awaited the coming of Captain Reddy and his band.

Red Hawk, the Apache, was still with them and his advice was followed in more than one respect. The sentries had been stationed and all was ready.

Within the house itself stood Lona, the girl, a faint pallor on her cheeks, but not one of real fear.

Hour after hour passed away and yet the raiders did not come.

At a certain point below the stables, his tall figure screened by a clump of trees, stood the borderer, Joe Bundy. He was looking and listening toward the south, eager to catch the first sound of hoofs, or the voices of Captain Red Jacket and his Bravos.

The night seemed unusually still. It was expected that the raid would take place from the south and Old Joe had asked for and secured the point of danger.

He did not grow tired of watching. On the contrary, as the moments passed, he became more and more on the alert.

All at once he heard a sound which almost lifted him out of his boots.

A shot had been fired behind him.

Quick as the shot itself the borderer turned and listened for another.

It soon came.

"By Jericho, the fiends have attacked from the north!" cried Old Joe. "Captain Reddy and his hounds have fallen upon the ranch, and I'm on the outside."

Carrying his Winchester at "full cock," Old Joe ran back and soon discovered that he had not guessed wrongly. The Red Bravos had come, and were riding round and round the house, yelling like a lot of devils, and now and then firing off their guns and revolvers for the purpose of terrifying the inmates.

Joe Bundy halted at a tree and, hugging it closely, watched these actions. Once or twice he raised the rifle and covered one of the ghostly horsemen, but lowered it without firing, for to shoot in his position would be to uncover himself to the enemy and invite destruction.

As yet the Bravos had met with no reception beyond that of silence from the inmates of the ranch. Joe felt confident that he was the only one out, and concluded that the first shot he heard had been fired by a picket who had retreated upon the house and was admitted.

The circling grew still at last, and Joe saw the horsemen come together within a few yards of his position.

He counted twenty in all, just the exact number of the brigand band. They sat on their steeds and put their heads together.

"We've got 'em cooped up like a lot of chickens," said a voice which might have been that of their leader. "We will summon them to surrender, and if we are refused we'll send a fireball at the house. There's nothing so convincing as a bit of fire."

The others laughed at this, and one of the band separating from the rest rode toward the house and lifted himself in his stirrups a short distance from the porch.

"Ho, there!" he cried, in loud tones. "We've come as per agreement, and now summon you to open your doors and listen to us. We are here in full force, and have come for a bit of cash. Give us the tithe that belongs to us and we'll ride off and let you enjoy yourselves without interruption."

"That's impudence for you," muttered Joe Bundy. "I've heard o' brass, but that chap's got enough ter start a foundry. I wonder of that ain't Captain Reddy himself?"

His sentence was cut short by a voice from the house, and the old borderer had no trouble in recognizing it. Mustang Merle was speaking.

"We don't intend to oblige you villains in the smallest particular," answered the young rancher. "We shall defend this house to the bitter end, and shall ask and give no mercy."

Joe Bundy heard the desperadoes laugh at these words, and then the spokesman cursed Mustang Merle for a fool.

"We may take the house itself," cried he. "You don't know who you're laughing at. We are the terrors of the border, and more than one foolish rancher has repented of his resolution to withhold from us the tribute we levy."

"You are welcome to all you can get at Mesquite," came from the house.

"Then we will take everything!"

The man who had spoken came back to the grouped riders and all drew together.

"You, Dolores, ride to the rear of the house with three men," Joe heard him say. "You, Pecos, take the right side and watch it, and you, Dan, the left side. We have them in a death-trap, and instead of the tribute-money we have asked, we will take all we can get."

The band broke up into sections, and the hidden borderer saw different ones ride off to obey their captain.

Captain Reddy and a few of his followers sat on their steeds where the conference had taken place, and in a little while Joe saw the leader of the Red Jackets take something from a bag which he carried at his saddle-bow.

It looked like an arrow, and this was confirmed when another man handed the raider a bow. Captain Red Jacket now fastened the object to a stick which he fitted to a bowstring, and one of the raiders leaned forward and struck a match.

"The mean skunks are goin' to try ter burn 'em out," ejaculated old Joe.

Even while he spoke the bowstring twanged and a missile of fire hurtled through the air.

The old man watched it with grating teeth and saw it describe a dazzling half-circle and light upon the dry roof of the house.

The burning arrow fastened there and presently a little flame leaped up, showing that it had caught.

"Another! quick, Monte!" cried the brigand chief. "We'll soon have them out at this rate. I have the exact range. That tribute money swells with the passing moments."

Monte leaned forward once more with another match in his dark hand, but he never got to touch it to the arrow which Captain Reddy had fitted to his bow.

Joe Bundy had thrown his rifle to his shoulder and as the match was about to touch the ready tow the loud report of the piece startled every one, and the raider pitched over his steed's neck with the blazing stick falling from nerveless fingers.

"I guess you won't want another dose," said old Joe; then he shouted:

"Here they are, boys! Pour it into the wretches and burden the ground with the hull lot!"

This attack in their rear seemed to confuse the raiders, for they fell back and sought in vain for a sight of their foe.

Again and again the Winchester spoke, and three men were writhing on the ground, and as many riderless horses had escaped from the band.

Captain Reddy, still unharmed himself, had fallen back and in a short time was joined by another raider who said something in hurried tones.

"Indians too?" said the Red Jacket chief. "Where did you see them, Dick?"

"There," answered the lieutenant, pointing to the left. "There must be at least a dozen, sir."

"Apaches?"

"I don't know."

Captain Reddy looked in the direction indicated by Dolores Dick and then ordered his men to his side. In an instant the raiders had collected and the chief said:

"It seems there are Indians in the vicinity, and we must be cautious. While we are not the Apaches' foes, we must do nothing to incur their hatred. It may be that they have hit upon this same night to plunder this rich ranch. But what has become of the enemy down yonder? He has not advanced, nor has he—"

At this moment Dolores Dick caught Captain Reddy's arm and pointed across the court.

"There sit your Indians," he remarked.

Captain Red Jacket bent forward and looked. He could just make out a number of dark figures on horseback and knew from their shape that they were Indians.

"Leave everything to me," said he, looking back at his followers, and, drawing a revolver, he rode straight at the figures, which did not move.

"Halt!" cried a voice when the Bravo was within ten yards of the group.

Captain Reddy drew rein and one of the ghosts in his front came toward him.

"Ha, Gray Eagle!" cried the raider chief, holding out his hand, which was taken by the Indian who had halted at his side. I did not expect to see you here; but, there's enough for all of us."

The Indian said nothing.

"It's the richest ranch in the South, and the one from which I believe you were kicked last summer."

The eyes of the red-skin fairly flashed.

"What does Captain Reddy want here?" he asked.

"Only a little tribute," he laughed. "We never take much, you know, Gray Eagle."

"Does my white brother want anything but money?"

"Nothing else."

"Will he let Gray Eagle and his bucks have the rest?"

"It is yours," was answered, laying his hand upon the Indian's naked arm.

"Then the red and white eagles will fight together. They can't hold out against us, for Gray Eagle has a friend in yon house, and Merle knows not his traitor."

The Indians and raiders had united, and the doom of Mesquite Ranch seemed sealed.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DOOM OF MESQUITE.

MEANWHILE the blaze produced by the fiery arrow shot by Captain Cussed had been extinguished by the inmates of the house. Red Hawk had made his way to the roof where he soon put an end to the fire which was making considerable headway, and which, if not attached when it was, would have soon gotten beyond control.

"I would like to know what became of Joe Bundy," said Mustang Merle. "Not that I don't think the old fellow capable of taking care of himself, but I would like to be assured that he is safe. Being on the outside he may be in a position to afford us a good deal of assistance and—"

The young rancher was interrupted by a shot and all listened and looked at one another.

When the report was followed by another and still another, Merle exclaimed that the borderer had attacked the raiders in the rear and would have headed a sortie if Red Hawk and others had not advised against it.

At the end of the conference between the captain of the Red Jackets and Gray Eagle the combined forces drew nearer to the house and the

Bravo chief once more summoned the defenders of the ranch to surrender. But he was met with the same determined refusal with which the first demand was received, and, sending a terrible threat at the house, he fell back to his congenial spirits.

"Where's Rustling Rob?" asked some one in the parlor of the ranch where the arms were stacked ready to be grasped in case of a charge by the outlaws.

Yes, where was the man suspected by Old Joe?

One said he had gone to the cellar to see that everything was safe there; another remarked that he had not been seen since the momentary flurry caused by the burning roof.

"What has become of Miss Lona?"

Mustang Merle heard this query and turned to look for the girl. He had seen her but a few moments before, standing in the middle of the floor with a ready Winchester in her hand—a weapon which she knew so well how to use; but now she was not there.

"She ran in direction of her room when Red Hawk climbed out upon the roof," the boy Chip explained.

"Call her down, Chip. She is brave enough to take part in the council we are about to hold," replied Merle, and the youth bounded away.

In a minute the voice of Chip was heard saying that Lona was not in her room, which was on the second floor, that he could not find her in any part of the house.

"Heavens! what has happened?" exclaimed the Boy Rancher, and in an instant he was going up the steps two at a time.

He nearly ran against Chip at the top of the flight; he sprang into Miss Lona's little room, but found her not.

The Pride of Mesquite Ranch was gone!

Mustang Merle rushed back to his breathless companions and then descended into the cavernous cellar. It, too, was empty.

"The back door has been opened!" cried some one.

This door could be reached by Lona without coming back to the defenders in the parlor, and sure enough it was unbarred.

Mustang Merle stood aghast at this discovery. That door had been unbarred from the inside, and that since the beginning of the attack!

Hunted high and low, Rustling Rob was not found and the defenders soon became loud in denunciation of his apparent treachery. As for Merle, he stood apart from all, his nails driven into his palms thinking of the suspicions of Joe Bundy.

What if he had denounced the wrong man? What if Rustling Rob and not Kyd Kemble was the traitor?

His silence was broken by a voice from the outside—the loud tone of Captain Red Jacket.

"We've got reinforcements," said the leader of the Bravos. "We don't want much for ourselves, but our allies may not let you off so easy."

"Their allies?" cried Mustang Merle, springing to Red Hawk's side. "What does he mean, boy?"

"It's all a lie," growled one of the ranchmen. "Nobody's going to help a rascal like Captain Cussed."

The young Indian shook his head over this remark.

"Red Hawk go out and see," said he, coolly. "He can climb to the roof and drop to the ground. Maybe he find Old Joe out there."

Merle knew the cunning of the Apache.

"Go," he cried. "And while you are outside look out for Lona and the traitor."

The Indian ran up the stairs, and, climbing out upon the roof, lowered himself over the eaves and dropped, cat-like, to the ground.

Minutes seemed hours to the defenders of the house; but in less than twenty Red Hawk reappeared among them. He was instantly surrounded.

"Gray Eagle out there," spoke the young red-skin. "Him come to keep his word. The traitor has gone to him."

"Did you see him, Red Hawk?"

"If Red Hawk had seen the traitor, his scalp would hang now at his belt. He saw Gray Eagle and Captain Red Jacket."

"But not Old Joe?"

"The tall white man was not to be seen by Red Hawk. They may have killed him, but Red Hawk thinks not. He—"

Something struck the roof.

In an instant a dozen cried, "Another arrow!" and the nimble Indian bounded away.

"To the port holes!" shouted Mustang Merle, and the rest of the defenders sprang to duty,

leaving the young Apache to cope, as before, single handed with the fire.

Arrow after arrow was now showered upon the roof, and it was ablaze in a dozen places. The light exposed the daring Indian who was jerking the dangerous shafts from among the shingles and flinging them to the ground, and bullets rattled all around him. All this time Merle and his men stood ready to open fire upon the enemy whenever he should show himself, but, fearing this, raider and Indian kept their distance and saved their lives.

Red Hawk was not permitted to expose himself alone to the fire of the allies. Others went to his rescue, but the united efforts of all were unavailing, and it was seen that the ranch was doomed.

The roof which was dry was on fire in twenty places and would soon be beyond saving.

The heroic Indian was at last driven from his post by the flames and almost total exhaustion, and with the whole roof in a mighty blaze, which leapt skyward with a terrible roar as it gathered volume, Mustang Merle stepped to the front door and laid his hand on the barricades.

The young rancher did not appear the least excited now.

He could fight raiders and Indians, but not flames.

"We must surrender to the wretches, boys," decided Merle, looking back over his shoulder at the employees of the ranch. "As for me, solicitude for Lona's fate partly forces me to this strait. I must know what has become of the girl, and I swear to you all that where old Mesquite stands another and a finer house will rise one of these days, and that, when that time comes, the career of Captain Cussed will have reached an end."

A cheer greeted this oath, and the first barricade came down. It was followed by a second, the men of Mesquite helping Merle in his work, and when the door was flung wide open the young owner of the ranch strode out upon the porch.

He had his followers at his back.

"We've smoked the rats out!" cried a boisterous voice. "Gentlemen, do you surrender?"

In response to this Mustang Merle walked toward the speaker, who sat on his horse with a cocked six-shooter in his hand, and in a moment had halted in front of Captain Red Jacket.

"We surrender," spoke the Boy Rancher. "We are obliged to give up because we can't fight fire without water."

The raiders leaned toward the defenders of the ranch standing in the ruddy light of the burning house and saw their weapons which they had brought with them.

"Down with your guns," commanded Captain Reddy.

Merle made a sign to his men and the Winchester were reluctantly grounded.

"Where's the treasure—the tribute?" queried the Bravos' captain.

Merle pointed toward the house.

"What, is it in the ranch yet?" gasped the bandit chief.

"It is there!"

The raiders looked and ground their teeth. The flames were now leaping round the house, encircling it in a whirlwind of fire, and already timbers were falling in, sending showers of sparks toward the heavens.

"The money and the powder are there—twenty kegs of the latter," continued Merle.

In an instant horses were reined back, some almost falling on their haunches, and the white-faced desperadoes were scrambling to get away from the burning building.

The young rancher did not move.

"The kegs are on the first floor with the cash," he went on. "You have come for tribute; why don't you collect it, captain?"

No answer.

"Where are your allies? What has become of Gray Eagle and his minions?"

Merle had left his place and walked to where the leader of the Bravos was staring first at the house and then at his coolness.

"What has become of Lona?" he continued.

"Though you have destroyed Mesquite you shall pay for this night's work. The hand of Merle of Mesquite is raised against you and yours. The villains you lead shall have upon their trail from this night until all accounts are settled, the owner of the ranch. Tribute shall be exacted of you—not in money, but in something costlier. And woe to the hand that has lifted itself against Lona. I know the traitor and the wretch he has served!"

A derisive smile stole over Captain Red Jacket's face, which became blanched the next

moment, for a terrible explosion seemed to lift the blazing house from the ground and hurl it into the air—a sky-rocket in a thousand parts, as it were.

The Boy Rancher's beautiful ranch home was no more! The Red Jackets had done their worst.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOST TRAIL.

THE sun coming up the next day, shone upon the ruins of once happy Mesquite.

A few dark specks were visible in the sky, showing that the vulture was hovering over the scene, but about the smoking ruins of the ranch not a human object was in sight.

Over the grazing-grounds of the Boy Rancher's herds the cattle roamed, not unguarded, but watched as before, though not by the same merry, whistling men.

Captain Red Jacket and his band of Bravos had departed, and one standing on the highest ground on the place could not have seen them. The explosion of the powder stored in the ranch-house had settled the fate of Mesquite. Beyond destroying the buildings it had done no damage, and the desperado captain had ridden away without one dollar of the tribute he had tried to collect from the young ranch king.

What has become of Mustang Merle?

Mounted on his black horse, and followed by two others as well mounted as himself, he was riding across a little valley, with a line of rugged hills in view.

He was the middle one of the three riders, the others being Old Joe Bundy and Red Hawk, the Apache.

The trio kept the middle of the valley, their eyes fixed on the ground, and every now and then they would bend over and eye it more closely. They acted like persons on a trail, which was visible from the saddle.

The sun crept higher and higher; he reached the meridian mark and began to go down the western sky. The riders did not relax their gait which, while not tiring, was quite a lively one, and at last, after having crossed a long stretch of country, they drew rein in an Indian camp to which Red Hawk had led them by the shortest trail, and the one taken by a body of riders who had passed over it before them.

The camp consisted of fifty well-built tepees, from which ran Indians of every age, and the three were soon surrounded by warriors, squaws, children and innumerable dogs.

"Her' we ar!" remarked Joe Bundy, looking at the Apaches. "Looks like we've caught the hull family at home. But I don't see anything of the beautiful specimen what swooped down upon Mesquite last night."

"Neither do I, Joe," answered Mustang Merle. "But we have followed the trail to the very confines of the camp. The marauders came back, but I don't see the rascal, Gray Eagle."

"Maybe he saw us comin', and slipped out the back door."

Red Hawk had guided his friends to his home, and when he slid from his horse and walked to where stood a young savage of his own age, eying him sharply, nearly every eye followed him.

"Where is Gray Eagle?" asked Red Hawk in low tones. "I see some of his bucks here, but where is the chief?"

"He did not come back with them," was the answer.

Red Hawk started.

"Be sure of what you say, Tall Deer."

"I am sure."

"Where is Dick, the White Apache?"

"Sick in his tepee."

Red Hawk glanced to the left and saw a face framed in the skin curtains of one of the tepees, and the next moment he was walking toward it.

The face he had seen was that of a white man, and the eyes seemed to twinkle as the young Indian came up.

"Where's your friend Gray Eagle?" demanded Red Hawk.

"How do I know?" was the tart response.

"But you know why he led his braves from the village?"

The curtains parted entirely and the tall form of Dick the White Apache stood before the youth.

"I'd like to know what right you, a boy, have to ask me such a question?" he cried.

"The right that belongs to the son of a great chief," exclaimed Red Hawk. "I am the son of Malletoga, the Winged Leopard; you are but a white Apache who has nothing in common with the Indian. You know that Gray Eagle went to Mesquite to steal the White Flower there. You would hide him and his prey if you

could. Red Hawk spits upon the white renegade," and the young Indian turned and walked back to his friends, leaving Dick, the renegade, in front of his tepee white from rage.

Mustang Merle watched the young Apache all the way back to the horses.

"Gray Eagle did not come back with his band," said Red Hawk. "We must go back and strike the trail of the chief."

But they did not go back immediately. Their steeds needed rest, and it was nearly dark when they rode out of the Apache camp with their faces turned once more toward the smoldering ruins of the ranch.

They had come all that distance for nothing. Gray Eagle had not accompanied his bucks home; he was somewhere with his captive, the fair Lona; but where?

Red Hawk and Merle rode back close together.

"It is somewhere among the hills," said the young red-skin talking earnestly. "I have heard it from my forefathers, and they got it from their ancestors. But the old trail has been lost these many years, though many have hunted for it. White men have come into the country and have died looking for the lost mines. Is our friend a hunter of them, too?"

Mustang Merle smiled faintly and looked at Joe Bundy.

"I think not," said he. "I have never heard him mention wealth in any way."

The last words were caught up by the sharp ears of Old Joe, and turning quickly he gave Merle a sharp look.

"I don't keer much for wealth, that's a fact; but it is principally because I've never had much ter keer for," he grinned. "I've got something right here that might be o' some value ter me some day, though I may be hunting a golden dream; I don't know."

The old man as he spoke laid one hand upon his heart and continued:

"Did you ever hear of it?" he asked. "If you haven't, Merle, mebbe Red Hawk has."

He divined one hand into his bosom and drew out a long, well-worn leather pocketbook, which he opened and deprived of a piece of paper.

"I've carried that a good many years," said Old Joe. "Let's halt here an' look at it."

All three drew rein and Bundy, taking out a little match-box, struck a light and unfolded the paper.

It was not much larger than his two hands; it was dark and old, showing that it had been carried a long time, but the keen eyes of Mustang Merle and his red friend saw upon it lines which ran in every direction.

A change suddenly came over the face of the young Apache. Instead of staring at the paper, he was gazing into Old Joe's face.

"Where did you find that, white man?" cried the Indian, leaning toward Bundy and seizing his wrist. "It looks like the paper carried by the white man who came to the Apache village years and years ago."

"I guess it's the same," grinned the old hunter. "I got it years ago, an' the man who gave it to me had no more use for it. What is it, eh? Why, they say it is the guide to the lost mines which ar' somewhar in this kentry. I've been lookin' for them ever since I got possession o' that paper, an' when one starts out on this mission, he never lets up until he sinks into the grave. That's what they say."

Mustang Merle held the old map in his hand, and was scrutinizing it sharply.

Suddenly he uttered a strange cry.

"What is it?" cried Old Joe.

"Light another match!"

In an instant a new match was sending its glare over the paper.

"Here where these lines cross," said Merle, "is a dot and then two crosses."

"They've caught my eye many a time, an' fooled me, too."

"If the dot means a tree, and the crosses two stones, I know where they are."

"The old Harry you do!" cried Joe Bundy.

"They're not far from Mesquite," continued the Boy Rancher. "But we are not looking for lost mines now. We are hunting Lona, who has fallen into the hands of a rascally Indian. Find her first, and then pay our respects to Captain Red Jacket. After that the old map and its mysteries."

"Unless—"

"Unless what, Joe?"

"Unless we should discover that Gray Eagle knows whar the lost mines ar'—"

"How should he?"

"He did not go back with his bucks, and the man from whom I got the map told me on his death-bed that there were other copies of it in

existence, and that not a few of them were in the hands of Indians."

Mustang Merle handed back the old map and for some time rode on in silence.

"Come; we are not riding as we should," he said and gave his steed the spur.

The next moment all three were flying over the ground and daylight found them once more on the boy's territory, and a bit of heavy smoke was rising from the ruins of Mesquite.

"Look yonder," cried one of the herders, pointing toward a hill which overlooked the scene of destruction.

All looked and saw outlined against the gray sky the figures of a man and a horse. The man looked giant-like in the saddle and the little group stared speechless at the apparition.

"Signal him to come down—that we will talk," said Merle, and the herder waved his hand, at which signal the horseman left the hill and rode forward.

"It's one of Captain Red Jacket's gang," growled the herders glowering at the rider.

"It is Dolores Dick, the Apollo of the lot," said Merle.

The Bravo came forward until he was within a few feet of the group, when he doffed his black hat with its feather, and said:

"I've come back to apologize. I've got enough of the dominion of Captain Cussed. Hereafter I am his enemy and at your service, Mustang Merle."

The young rancher eyed the man sharply, and the lips of Red Hawk said in low tones:

"Don't trust the serpent of the South, Merle."

CHAPTER VIII.

A MIDAIR DRAMA.

DOLORES DICK appeared more than sincere.

He said he had quarreled with Captain Red Jacket several times lately, that he was tired of raiding peaceful ranches, and that he wanted to quit the country and live thereafter the life of an honest man.

He told all about the plot to levy tribute from Mesquite. He said he had opposed it from the first, but that Captain Reddy was determined and had forced him to give in and had had him watched all the time as if he feared betrayal.

Dolores Dick gave the route taken by the Red Jacket, and, to show that he was no longer to be regarded as one of them, he tore the feather from his hat and dashed it to the ground.

A smile unseen by the desperado passed over Old Joe Bundy's face.

"He's too penitent for Old Joe," muttered the borderer. "Wolves don't turn lambs all at once."

"And now good-by," said Dolores Dick, withdrawing. "I have told you all I know about Captain Cussed. You will find him in his camp on the Rio Tagus. He laughs at your following him as strong as he is, and he won't be looking for you. You have a smoking ranch to avenge and I wouldn't blame you if you take every head in the gang."

Dolores Dick turned the head of his steed toward the west and rode away.

"Ef it warn't for shootin' a man in the back, hang me if I wouldn't give him a pill," said Bundy, lifting his rifle and covering Dolores Dick. "I'm convinced it would be savin' us a good deal of trouble, for I read the lie in his eye even while he war scorin' Captain Reddy. What say you, Red Hawk?"

"He lied all through," was the prompt answer. "He came back to set the trap and bait it."

Mustang Merle made no reply for a spell.

"He ran a risk in coming back," he replied at length.

"Don't you think he is playing rascal?"

"He may be. I don't trust these fellows very far, Joe."

"Burst my buttons, if I trust 'em an inch!"

By this time Dolores Dick had reached the summit of the little hill, halting there a spell, he doffed his hat once more and bowed low to those who watched him. The following moment he wheeled and rode down the slope and was lost to view.

Scarcely had he vanished ere Red Hawk urged his horse toward the hill, but drew rein near its base and ran up the slope with the speed of a racer. Near the summit he dropped upon all-fours and crawled to the top.

Far away rode Dolores Dick, his steed moving swiftly over the swelling ground, and the keen eyes of the Indian could see him striking his legs with his hands as if he was in high glee.

"Red Hawk will see you again, Dick," said the Apache. "You can't deceive the son of

Malletoga, the old chief of the Apaches. His eyes are too sharp for you," and Red Hawk drew back and ran to his horse.

The hunt for Lona's trail now began. If Gray Eagle had not returned with his band to the Apache village he was in hiding elsewhere with his captive. There was now no doubt in Merle's mind that Rustling Rob was in the plot to seize the girl, that he, and not Kyd Kemble, was the traitor of the ranch. He longed to encounter Kyd whose forgiveness he would ask at once; but the young man had departed and probably would never cross his path again.

It was a day of fruitless trailing. The keen eyes of the ranchers were employed, but without avail. They could not discover where Gray Eagle had deserted his band, nor could they find a trace of Lona or Rustling Rob.

Night drew about the ranch once more. The herders brought up the stock which had not been molested by red or white, and gathered around the stables and among the cedars which showed signs of the fierce fire that had licked up the buildings.

Mustang Merle was standing apart lost in thought when a hand was laid on his arm and he saw the homely face of Joe Bundy looking down over his shoulder.

"Not a word," whispered the old borderer. "Come with me, Merle. I have something for you to look at."

The Boy Rancher followed without a question, and the two crossed the little pasture beyond the stables and reached the creek. The waters shone in the light of the few stars that were visible in the sky, but the rising moon would soon render the ripples more discernible.

Joe Bundy led Merle down into the gulch where Captain Cussed had deposited his note of warning, and halted there.

"We may not see anything for some time," whispered the old man. "But here's whar I saw it an' I'm confident thar's another act in the drama."

"What did you see, Joe?"

"Wait."

The passing minutes became an hour and then the rim of the moon, appearing over one of the walls of the ravine, showed the silent watchers the perpendicular side of the other.

"There," said Joe clutching Merle's arm. "Look up the wall—about half way."

The sharp eyes of the young rancher had already seen the very object to which Old Joe had called his attention. Something seemed to be hanging along the wall—dangling from the end of a rope, as it were. It didn't look very much like a human being, but still Merle thought he could make out a head.

"That's what I saw awhile ago when I war scoutin' here," said Joe. "It came down a piece just like that and then went back like a spider goin' up his string."

"Did it come all the way to the ground?"

"I didn't wait ter see, but ran back ter post you."

Mustang Merle in his eagerness leaned forward and looked intently at the suspended object.

"It looks a little like an Indian," said he. "See how well he clings to the rope—like a sailor."

"Or like a chap used to the lasso."

Mustang Merle gave Old Joe a quick look.

The object was half way down the wall now and was hanging along the steep side in the moonlight. The hour was still and this gave the swinging apparition a ghostlier look.

All at once it stopped and seemed to rest in mid air by wrapping a pair of long legs around the rope.

Merle drew his revolver and cocked it.

The person on the rope was now thirty feet from the ground, but showed no signs of coming all the way down.

"If you shoot him we may lose the secret," said Old Joe.

"You are right," and the Boy Rancher lowered the six-shooter and continued to watch the man.

Suddenly he began to descend as if he had heard or seen a signal from below. He came down the cord hand over hand and the two friends saw him alight with the silky drop of a cat.

Old Joe Bundy drew his shoes and stood in his bare feet on the stony bed of the gulch. His eyes fairly blazed with excitement.

"We want that climber," cried he, and as the Unknown started off, the old borderer sprang away as if hurled from a catapult, and went forward, clearing many feet at a bound.

Mustang Merle saw him vanish, for the moonlight did not brighten objects at the foot of the wall as it did along the side, but all at once

he heard a sharp cry and then the voice of Old Joe.

A singular stillness followed the cry.

Mustang Merle had seen no one bound away from where Joe had come upon the mysterious climber.

What did the silence mean?

He ran forward himself, flitting down the bed of the ravine until a jet of fire flashed full in his face, and he felt the wind of a bullet.

The Boy Rancher was partially stunned by the leaden pellet and almost lost his footing, but in a moment he had recovered and was dashing forward again.

A second shot was not fired, and when he reached the spot where he had last seen Joe Bundy, he nearly fell over something lying on the ground.

"It's Old Joe, boy," said a voice, at the sound of which Merle came to a sudden halt.

The young owner of Mesquite bent over the figure which had risen to a sitting posture, and before he could reply it had staggered upon its feet.

"I had the climber in my fingers jest a moment, but, like all his infernal race, he's slicker than an eel," said the borderer. "The chap who came down the rope war Gray Eagle, and I got his knife right here."

The hand of Old Joe touched his breast, and the next instant the tall figure of the borderer lay at Mustang Merle's feet.

CHAPTER IX.

MUSTANG MERLE VANISHES.

"BUT for that pesky knife," said Old Joe, when he came out of his sudden swoon and found Merle bending over him, "but for that I would have held the red-skin. I guess it's not as bad as I thought, though I thought the blade went clean through my heart when I felt it in me. He didn't hit you, eh, Merle?"

"A miss is as good as a mile," said the young rancher, with a smile. "I heard the ping of the bullet, but didn't see the face of the shooter."

"It was Gray Eagle an' no one else. I saw him once at the head of a lot of cattle-thieves down on the Tagus, an' knew him the moment I grabbed him."

The two friends looked up at the moonlit wall and discovered that the dangling rope had disappeared. Old Joe said he felt strong enough to walk back to the fires, and accomplished the task without much trouble. There his wound was thoroughly examined and pronounced not dangerous, though he had had a narrow escape—the Indian's knife missing his heart by a hair, having been turned from its course by a button.

Red Hawk smiled knowingly when the adventurers told the story of their scout, and the gulch was searched by the whole camp. Every nook was well explored, but nothing was revealed; the Indian who had come down the rope had vanished as completely as though he had sunk into the earth at the base of the wall.

The fate of Lona was still an impenetrable mystery, and daylight found it as far from a solution as ever.

"Do you think that Gray Eagle can have discovered the lost mine?" the Boy Rancher said to Joe Bundy when they had halted after a long hunt through the hills near the ranch.

"It kinder looks that way," answered the old man. "I'll show you the paper by daylight," and he felt for the map.

Suddenly he turned pale and looked strangely at Mustang Merle.

"Hang me, if it's here," he cried. "I had it when I went after Gray Eagle last night an' I haven't thought of the map since."

The map was gone! He had either been robbed of, or had lost, the trail to the lost mines, and while he talked his voice trembled.

"I've carried that map for years an' have studied it a thousand times," said he. "Once I nearly lost my life in defense of it. That infernal Indian took it, Merle!"

"Did he know you had it?"

"It wasn't a secret. Nearly every one in this country knew I had the map which old Thompson carried till he died—worn out by his fruitless hunt. Gray Eagle is a cunning Indian an' he was very apt to know that I had the map; an' when he gave me his knife he made a dive for my treasure an' secured it."

Merle watched the shadow, that settled over Old Joe's face at the conclusion of his story.

"You may get it some day, Joe," he said.

In a moment the countenance of the borderer brightened.

"I will!" he exclaimed. "I'll have my map back if I have to skin alive the man what stole it. Indian or white, he sha'n't keep the plan. I wouldn't be in this part of the kentry now if it wasn't for the map of the lost mines. Have it? If it costs me every drop o' blood that circulates through this old body; but I'll help you right along, boy."

The two grasped hands and sealed a friendship which was to become as firm as iron and as lasting as life.

Meantime Red Hawk the Apache had not been idle. He, too, had been searching the country, looking at the ground with the eye of a fox-hound.

His lithe body seemed everywhere. He would drag it over the rocks and twist it out of narrow places, all the time keeping his eye open, and with his hearing constantly strained.

The day was drawing to a close and the hands of the ranch were coming in from the wearisome hunt for the lost trail.

All were in but Merle, and the sun kissing the tips of the hills for the last time disappeared with his good-night.

Red Hawk came up to where Joe Bundy stood gazing soberly at the dark ruins of the ranch home and recalling the stirring scenes that marked its destruction.

"Where Merle?" asked the young Apache.

Joe wheeled quickly at the voice.

"He ain't here, that's certain; I haven't seen him since the middle o' the afternoon when he said he was goin' ter ride over the rise yonder an' look for signs along the creek."

The Indian turned away.

Swift of foot, Red Hawk made his way across the pasture, leaped the little stream and kept on. He gained the rise mentioned by Old Joe, and stopped there.

The shadows of approaching night were at hand. The country beyond the hill would soon fade from view, but the eagle eye of the young Apache was keen enough to enable him to sweep the scenery and note something which would have escaped the notice of eyes less keen.

He saw a dark object moving toward him from the west, and while he watched it, making out as it came nearer the outlines of a horse, his curiosity became aroused, though he did not betray any sudden emotion.

"It is Merle's black horse," said the Indian addressing himself. "He is coming back without his rider," and Red Hawk ran down the hill and crouched beside a clump of mesquite bushes and continued to eye the horse.

The handsome black came on unconscious of the crouching figure in the gathering night and when within a few feet of the bush a form sprang out, a hand gripped the drooping bridle rein, and in a second Red Hawk was astride the astonished steed.

"You must go back!" cried the young Indian, whirling the horse about. "You must show me what has become of Merle the Rancher."

Away went Jet, the steed, back over the ground he had just traversed, the eye of the rider sweeping the grass as he went and in a few minutes horse and boy were lost to view.

Two miles from the scene of his capture Jet halted and drew back with a shiver which the Indian felt.

"Did you lose Merle here?" exclaimed Red Hawk, slipping to the ground and bending over it. "Ah, I see."

The Apache had discovered signs which to him were as readable as the signals of his tribe. Holding the bridle rein in one hand he led the horse on and on, reading the ground all the time and at no time straightening until he was far from the spot, when for the first time he stood erect.

Then he vaulted into the saddle once more. He gathered up the lines and looked ahead between the fox-like ears of the Boy Rancher's horse.

The country stretched far away, losing itself in the darkness that prevailed there. Behind him were the anxious spirits of Mesquite Ranch. Should he go back to them? Should he ride Jet back to the old ranch and let his appearance tell the story of another act in the drama being enacted on our Southern Border?

He shook his head as if he had weighed these questions in his mind and had decided adversely to them all. He leaned over on one side of the saddle and tightened the girth. There was determination in the dark eyes of the young Indian.

He was attached to Mustang Merle. They had been friends almost from the day of the young nabob's coming into the region, and the friendship of a soul like Red Hawk's is not to be misjudged.

By and by he stood bolt upright in Merle's stirrups and placed one hand behind his ear, forming there a sort of trumpet.

The horse had heard something, for his sharp ears were set forward and like his rider he was listening with all his might.

At last Red Hawk touched Jet with his heels and the animal started off again.

Again and again the Indian repeated the act until the horse was flying over the ground like a black arrow.

Now the Apache heard the hoofs of another steed and it was straining every nerve and was some distance ahead of him, but, as yet, not visible.

On, on went Red Hawk, and in like manner the person he pursued. It was a race between the Indian and an unknown, but the former did not stop to count the dangers that might attend such a chase. He only urged the black steed on, faster and faster, gaining now a little and again falling back for a spell.

The eye of the Indian rider at last caught a glimpse of the quarry. He saw between him and the stars where they seemed to lay thick along the rim of the horizon an object that rose and fell with the ground. This was the quarry; this was the person he was straining every nerve to overtake.

The race at last became better matched. The two horses were nearly side by side; but a spurt would take the Indian's prey ahead and he would have to fall behind and out of reach again.

During all this time Red Hawk did not touch the revolver he carried at his belt. He seemed to have forgotten it entirely; he saw, thought of, nothing but the man flying from before his horse.

Jet had entered into the race with the spirit of his young rider.

He was trying to bring Red Hawk alongside the stranger and at last just beyond a little valley where the young mesquite grew in profusion, the Indian leaned forward with his eye riveted on the man ahead and with his right hand outstretched to seize him.

Then it was that the foremost rider turned for the first time since the race began. Red Hawk saw him wheel in his saddle and look at him.

"Ho!" exclaimed the Indian, as if he had made a discovery, and then making a grab at the man's arm he almost precipitated himself from the saddle.

"Not yet!" ground a voice in the Indian's face. "Not yet, my red eagle!"

Red Hawk saw the six-shooter which was thrust into his very face, and he made a quick dip which was intended to let the bullet pass over his head.

The next moment the air seemed to be on fire; horse and rider fell back from the sudden report, and with a demon laugh the man dashed on.

He had reserved his fire for the supreme moment, but it had missed.

The Indian righted himself in the saddle before the horse recovered. He whipped out the revolver until then untouched, leveled it and sent a bullet after the man ahead. There was a sharp cry, the figure in the saddle ahead pitched forward, and with a shout of victory the young Apache dashed on again.

CHAPTER X.

AMONG THE RED JACKETS.

HALF a mile further on the Indian drew rein.

He had failed to overtake the man he had shot at. His shot seemed to have lent new speed to the horse he had followed so long, and the animal and his rider had disappeared.

It was a deep puzzle for Red Hawk. He looked in every direction and listened with all ears, but the only sound he heard was the sweep of the night wind through the grass of the plain.

By and by Red Hawk turned back, but reluctantly. He did not like to give up the chase which had come to such a poor conclusion. He had seen the face of the man in the momentary flash of his revolver, and he wanted to take him back to the burned ranch in triumph. If he could do this he might solve the mystery that hung around Mustang Merle's disappearance, for the person he had chased ought to know something about it.

The return was a dreary one for the young Apache, but he gave his steed the spur and rejoined the little group on the ranch just when some were saying that he had deserted them and gone back to his tribe.

Merle had not returned to his own and the sight of the Indian on the Boy Rancher's horse increased the excitement and led his followers to believe that he had fallen into the hands of Gray Eagle, who had so narrowly escaped from the clutches of Old Joe Bundy.

But let us leave the ranch for a spell; let us cross the leagues of level and rolling land that lay between it and a certain spot and solve that which is so mysterious to the friends of the young ranch monarch.

While Red Hawk was chasing the unknown rider through the night, three horses were galloping southward. They were ridden by as many persons, but one was bound to the saddle, and though he could hold the rein, his hands were secured by stout cords.

This prisoner rode between the others who were men, one of whom bore a striking resemblance to Captain Red Jacket. They kept out in the open, avoiding the clumps of mesquite as if they suspected the presence of an enemy there, and their steeds went rapidly over the ground.

The captive was Mustang Merle and the person who rode on his left was none other than the redoubtable Captain Red Jacket. The other man was the homely raider known as Pecos Pete.

For some time the trio had galloped over the ground without exchanging a word. The two men watched the boy, but did not refrain from exchanging smiles with one another, and at last Captain Red Jacket, leaning toward Merle, said gayly:

"By Jove, a fine night for a gallop, eh, Merle? We shall not be very long on the go, but will reach camp by daybreak and then you can have more liberty than we like to allow you just now."

The young rancher looked into the swarthy face of the raider captain.

"What do you expect to realize out of this venture?" he asked.

"Ransom instead of tribute," was the answer. "We shall hold you until we can communicate with Mesquite and secure what we missed by the burning of the house."

For a moment the boy did not reply. He rode on in silence, but not without stealing a sly glance at Captain Cussed.

"What if I should instruct my friends not to pay you a dollar?" he said.

"No fears of that, I guess," laughed the raider. "You are not such a fool as that, Merle; no, not quite. We don't want to harm you, but we do want to clutch some of the golden dollars you have stored away in the treasure safes of Mesquite."

"Did you kill my horse?"

Merle directed his question at the man who rode on his right.

"No," growled Pecos Pete. "The black demon got away from me."

A smile came instantly to Mustang Merle's lips.

"Do you think he went back to camp and told the story of your capture?" asked Captain Red Jacket.

"That remains to be seen."

"And Mesquite will muster her men and try to retake you, eh?"

No answer.

"That would be fatal to your future plans," said the outlaw with a merciless leer on his face. "If you want to see the old ranch again you don't want your people to attempt to fight the Red Jackets of the Southwest."

On, on went the three riders, and as the new day approached they neared a stream of considerable proportions and by and by rode into a small camp where more than a dozen rough men sat around fires cooking their breakfast.

At sight of the trio the men sprung up.

They looked first at the tall man who rode at the boy's left and then at the young rancher himself. They saw that Captain Cussed had not returned empty-handed. He had found the boy nabob and that meant a handsome ransom.

Mustang Merle was permitted to dismount and his hands were freed. He was now an inmate of Captain Red Jacket's camp and his blood fairly boiled as he looked round upon the men who had burned Mesquite and at that moment he wished for his followers.

"So that's the young chap, is it?" said a voice at the boy's elbow and Merle turned to see a large man with a dark face leering at him from beneath a pair of bushy, overhanging eyebrows.

"So you've come to life have you!" said the boy, for the man was one of his former hands, dismissed two years before for some rascally work on the ranch.

"That's just what I've done," grinned the ruffian. "I am Sam Seton, the man with the

scar," and he pushed back his reddish locks and exposed a scar on one of his temples. "You recollect how I got that, don't you?"

Merle turned from the man with a look of disgust and looked at Captain Red Jacket.

"I said when I left your ranch that I would live to get even," growled the same voice. "I don't forget some things. And now I'm on an equal footing with you and am not beholden to Mustang Merle. See here!"

The next instant there fell upon the boy's shoulder a hand that seemed to have the weight of a trip-hammer. The long fingers of Sam Seton sunk into his flesh, and he was jerked almost off his feet by the burly ruffian.

Merle, however, by a quick movement unexpected by the man, released himself and, straightening, faced the fellow covering him with his finger as he did so.

"That is the ruffian who insulted Lona and who got that scar for his infamy," cried the boy who was as cool as Seton was enraged and furious. "I sent him from the ranch against the wishes of my men who wanted to hang him. That is the man who opened the treasure-box of Mesquite and stole some of our funds. He is a born ruffian and thief, and the rope that is to throttle him is already made."

A loud laugh at Sam Seton's expense greeted this sally and the raider started toward the Boy Rancher.

"I'll settle old scores now!" he cried. "I'll have my inning where men can't interfere, and if you don't look out you'll find your handsome face spoiled."

Merle saw the demonism that flashed in the fellow's eye and fell back a pace. As he passed one of the raiders he caught sight of a revolver protruding prominently from a belt and in an instant held it in his hand.

This sudden move on the boy's part rather disconcerted the ruffian, but did not check his advance.

"Stand where you are, Sam Seton!" shouted Merle, covering the face with the six-shooter. "I am not your prisoner, but Captain Red Jacket's. I have a right to defend myself wherever I may be and I certainly claim that right here, though a captive."

The man had stopped at last. The threatening menace of the revolver seemed to have brought him to a full stop, and with his face the color of scarlet he did not know what to do.

There was a vast difference between the two in height. Sam Seton towered above Mustang Merle like a tree above a weed. He looked large enough to fall upon the boy and crush him at one blow, but the cocked weapon put a damper upon his designs.

"Why don't you carry out your threat, Sam?" asked some voices on both sides. "You ought to be able to ring the neck of a pullet like that one."

This encouraged the ruffian and sent him forward one more. It was a fatal step.

He was descending upon the young rancher when the revolver, dropping a mite, went off, and back from the smoke fell Sam Seton with the cry of a wounded man.

"Served him right!" muttered Captain Red Jacket who had seen the whole affair without having tried to check it. "The boy has the grit of a lion and knows how to take care of number one."

The next moment, with a glance at Sam Seton writhing on the ground and filling the air with his groans, he took hold of Merle's wrist and led him from the spot.

"If you had killed the rascal, it would have been no loss," said Captain Red Jacket in low tones.

"I could have done that, but I only winged him for the rope," was the reply.

By and by Sam rose and glared at Mustang Merle, who was now standing some distance off with the captain of the raiders, and after a mad stare he shook his fist at the boy and walked off, nursing a wounded shoulder, when it might have been worse, for Merle was a dead shot, and instead of killing the outlaw outright, had only wounded him.

"What is my ransom to be?" asked the boy of Captain Cussed, after he had partaken of the breakfast cooked among the coals.

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Well, captain, go and get it," smiled the Boy Rancher.

"What, don't you intend to advise the payment of the amount?" exclaimed the Red Jacket, falling back.

"Not a dollar of it! Did you think I would buy my freedom of the man who destroyed my ranch? Captain Red Jacket, you have yet to know Mustang Merle."

CHAPTER XI.

OLD JOE'S TRAIL.

OLD JOE BUNDY was among the first to assert that Merle had fallen into the hands of his enemies, and the return of the black horse by Red Hawk the Indian was proof positive of this.

The effective force of the ranch numbered fourteen, including Joe and the Indian, and the men were eager to cross the long stretch of soil between them and the river where Dolores Dick had said Captain Red Jacket and his men were to be found, and boldly attack the bandit prince.

When day came the capture of Merle was confirmed. Prints of hoofs were found, and the Indian decided that three horses had gone south from that point.

"But there's the girl," said Joe Bundy, taking Red Hawk aside. "I don't like the idea of leavin' her in the clutches of Gray Eagle, the red sinner, who got away from me in the gulch. Some one ought to stay back an' look after things here. The boys ar' bound ter go an' rescue Merle, if possible. You say the man you chased last night was Dolores Dick?"

The young Indian nodded.

"He ain't so penitent as he let on," continued Bundy. "I saw the sly Old Harry in his eyes all the time he war pretendin' ter give Captain Cussed away. He came back here for a purpose."

There was no answer by the young Indian, but he turned to the determined men who were saddling their steeds and looking at their firearms.

It meant that they intended to ride to Captain Red Jacket's camp, and rescue Merle at all hazards, if he were a prisoner of the Red Jackets. They were valiant fellows, and all devoted to their young master. There was not among them one who would not have died for Merle, and, with the single exception of Sam Seton, none of the employees of Mesquite Ranch had ever deserted his post, or proven unworthy the young rancher's regard.

"Let the long man stay," said the Indian at last. "Red Hawk will go with the white hunters to the bandit's camp. They may need the Apache on the trail."

"I'll stay an' give a good account of myself when you come back," replied Joe, and a few hours later the rescuers rode out and parted from Old Joe with many a wave of the hand, and assurances that they would not return without Mustang Merle.

"Of course I hope they'll keep their word," mused Joe, "but it's a ticklish job. In the first place, the Red Jackets are in the majority, an' in this kentry the majority is expected ter rule; but I don't know. The boys ar' fightin' in a good cause, an' there ar' some gritty ones goin' over the hills yonder."

He lifted his head, but the last one had passed out of sight, and he was the only one left on Mesquite Ranch.

Old Joe was not afraid to be thus left alone, and he saw the shadows lengthen without feeling that uneasiness which sometimes comes to very brave men.

His wound did not give him much trouble. The button which had deflected the point of Gray Eagle's knife had saved his life, and it was little better than a slight flesh wound, hardly worth looking after.

Armed with his Winchester he crept through the shadows toward the gulch.

If there was to be another drama in mid-air he wanted to see it, and to this end stationed himself where he could command a good view of the rocky wall.

Hour after hour of the night went by, and not a sound broke the stillness of the place.

Old Joe, hidden among the rocks that lined the sides of the gulch, was not visible, and the bats and night-birds flew past without seeing him.

All the time he kept his eyes riveted upon the wall. They had examined it closely during the day, but could not see what had caused Gray Eagle to descend by the rope at that particular point.

Here and there dark patches of moss clung to the wall, and over a large portion of it hung long festoons of vines, covered with a small flower which perfumed the hot air of the ravine.

It was a long time before Old Joe's vigilance was in any way rewarded. He heard at last a sound which seemed at first the notes of a certain night-bird common in those parts. It made the old mine-hunter listen with all ears.

"The endin' of that whistle ain't quite natural," mused Joe. "I've heard the bird so often that I know jest how it finishes its note. I guess that bird's a man."

Presently, as if in confirmation of old Joe's

decision, there came gliding down the gulch a figure which almost touched the ground like a skulking panther. The hidden man watched it until it reached a spot almost opposite him, where it halted, and standing there in the starlight and nearly within arm's reach of his position, revealed itself a human being.

Joe Bundy devoured the form with his eyes and wanted to spring over the rock behind which he was crouching and seize the fellow by the scruff of the neck.

"The traitor has come back, eh?" mentally ejaculated the old man. "What brings Rustling Rob back here if not the mystery that hangs over Lona's fate?"

The man in the gulch started off, followed by the keen eyes of Joe Bundy, and the old man creeping from behind his stone glided down the gulch, keeping in the shadow of the wall and never for a moment removing his eyes from the figure a few feet in advance.

All at once the head figure stopped, and in an instant Joe stood still. The next moment Rustling Rob moved toward the wall and disappeared among a lot of huge rocks which seemed to have been piled there by some natural convulsion.

Old Joe waited twenty minutes and then an hour for the young traitor's return, but as he came not, he crept to the stone and found that one of them deftly concealed the mouth of a cavern.

He listened there for a spell, but hearing nothing, slipped into the place and groped his way back under the lofty wall that rose above him.

The old borderer stopped there until he had formed his plans, and then having stored his Winchester near the entrance, he drew a revolver and pushed on. It was a long trail in the dark, for the old man was compelled to grope his way, not knowing whither a step on either side might lead him, but he shut his teeth hard and kept on.

He halted at last and suddenly. The notes of that same "bird" had sounded upon his ears once more, and so near him that he drew back against the dark wall and cocked the revolver. The sound was answered now from far back in the gloom and the following moment a light was struck, revealing to Old Joe's eyes the figure of a man.

But now occurred another thing, and it threatened the very existence of the miner. Some one was between him and the entrance, and that somebody was coming toward him, over the same ground he had just traversed! He was between two fires and in the darkness of an unknown cavern.

"Never been in this pickle before," said Joe Bundy. "It's like bein' between Old Harry an' the deep sea, an' one's about as bad as t' other. If I go on I'll run right into the light yonder, an' if I stay here I'll have ter tackle the chap what's comin' this way."

It was a dilemma sure enough.

"I believe," continued Joe, "I'm not very far from Lona. The man who holds the light looks like Gray Eagle an' the person who is comin' down this corridor—I've got ter meet him right away."

Bundy spoke the last words with the whole terrible situation before him and unavoidable. He could hear the person coming down the corridor, overturning a pebble now and then, and the noise it made in falling downward in the dark startled them.

Casting a final glance at the light and marking its location as well as he could, he put up his weapon and turned to meet the man coming toward him. He had not much time for preparation.

"I've got a pair o' good hands an' I guess I haven't lost any o' my powers lately," mused Old Joe. "I know about where the average man carries his throat, even in the dark, and I guess I won't miss this one."

Gently touching the wall at his back, he waited like a tiger in the dark for the unseen. On, on he came apparently unconscious of the man in ambush.

Old Joe seemed to measure his approach by the steps he heard. He wondered if the man with the light heard them, too.

Suddenly, but without noise, the big right hand of Joe Bundy went forward and closed in an instant upon the object it met.

There was a quick start and a light cry.

"Not a yeli," whispered the captor. "Old Joe Bundy's got you in his vise. Who ar' ye, anyhow?"

"Kyd Kemble!"

"Heavens!" cried Old Joe almost dropping his man.

He had found the overseer—the dismissed youth

of Mesquite Ranch, and the person believed by Merle to be the traitor and Gray Eagle's ally.

Instead of gripping the young man's throat with all his power, Old Joe released it and drew him close.

"I'm glad I've found you, Kyd, for I never did believe you were the black sheep of the ranch. I reckon Merle wouldn't want ter turn you off again from what he's discovered since you went off. But what brings you here?"

"My mission is the same as yours, Joe, it must be," answered the overseer. "Lona has disappeared. I know that. She has fallen into the hands of the Apache who has been aided in his infamous scheme by Rustling Rob, the traitor. I have found his retreat. This is the rendezvous of the two rascals."

"Is Lona here?"

"She must be, but I was here last night. I went over this cavern as well as I could. It is a wonderful place. Away back under the rocks it opens into strange chambers, and I have found on one of the walls certain marks which look like old letters; but I dared not strike too many matches."

The heart of Joe Bundy seemed to leap into his throat.

"Did you really see letters cut into the stone?" he cried.

"I did, Joe."

"Great Jericho! what if I've found the lost bonanza?"

At that moment a hand seized his wrist and he knew that it meant silence.

CHAPTER XII.

NETTING A TRAITOR.

It was not necessary for young Kemble to command silence; the touch was quite enough, and Old Joe stood as motionless as a rock in the dark. He could not imagine what his companion had seen or heard, and he waited for the next act in the drama underground.

In a few seconds a footstep was heard coming toward them. The light which Joe had seen no longer shone like a star in the gloom, and they could see nothing where it had gleamed.

Nearer and nearer came the footfall.

The hand of Kyd Kemble had slipped from the tall miner's wrist, and both were waiting breathless in the cavern, Old Joe with a knife lying along his arm, with his long fingers twined about the hilt.

Kyd stood between him and the heart of the cavern.

"I'll watch here with the eye of an eagle," suddenly said a voice so near that the twain started. "You must not be gone very long. This old rascal has the eye of a hawk and suspected me from the first."

"Gray Eagle will not be gone very long," was the reply. "He trusts his young white ally and knows that he will find the bird in the cage when he returns."

At that supreme moment a hand touched Old Joe's breast and pushed him toward the wall. How closely he hugged it then! He tried to force his lank body into the stone, for well he knew that the hand which had touched him admonishingly, telling so much, belonged to his companion, and that it was desired that the talkers in the dark should be permitted to pass undisturbed.

The next moment something brushed Old Joe, and even scraped his naked hand, but he did not move. He heard the same sound of footsteps, and not until they had passed did he take a new breath.

"Gray Eagle is going off," said Kyd Kemble, in a whisper. "We shall soon have this cave to ourselves—just what we want."

"But the traitor—Rustling Rob—is not going," answered Joe. "We may have to look after the young scamp."

"That we won't hesitate to do, if necessary. Come now."

The two glided along the corridor, feeling the wall with their hands for a guide, and ere long they were deep in the heart of the underground retreat.

"Hark!" suddenly whispered Kyd, and both stood fast. "I heard a sound. Some one is coming back from toward the entrance."

Sure enough so it seemed. In a moment they saw the flash of a taper, and there stood out in dark outline against the red rock the figure of Rustling Rob, the traitor of Mesquite Ranch.

Joe and the young overseer watched him with all eyes. He stood so plainly revealed by his own light that the play of countenance was distinctly visible, and Kemble felt his blood flow hot through his veins as he looked.

All at once Rustling Rob threw down the match and came on again.

"Let me grapple with him; my hands are itching for the job," said Kemble. "But for his treachery I would not be a suspect to-night."

"Take him!"

On came Rustling Rob, his boots sounding loudly on the hard floor of the corridor, and when he felt a hand touch him in the dark and close suddenly upon his throat, as if the fingers had the eyes of an owl, he fell back with a grated curse.

But the grip of the angered overseer was like the vise's, and he held on to his prey though he was dragged back by Rob.

"A light, Joe!" cried Kemble, and in a jiffy the scene was revealed and Old Joe Bundy was bending forward holding over his head a match that showed the pallid face of Rustling Rob.

The young traitor swore roundly when he discovered who his captors were, and when Kyd demanded that he guide them to where Lona was, he dropped into stubborn sullenness and looked at them with a fiendish grin.

Rustling Rob refused to guide them a single foot and when Joe threatened to hold him up against the wall of rock and choke the secret from him, he only grinned the more, sending back in this manner his defiance.

"You're in league with that meanest of red scoundrels, Gray Eagle," said Old Joe. "You had a nice home on the ranch, but you wasn't satisfied with it. You had to enter the service of the Apache girl-stealer. Worse than that: you stole Lona for him, taking her from the house when we were defending it against Captain Red Jacket. How did you do it?"

No reply.

Kyd Kemble grew impatient.

"March him down the corridor!" he cried, and with the hand of Old Joe sinking into his shoulder, Rustling Rob was hustled along until Kemble commanded a halt.

"We must be near it," he said, striking another match on the wall.

"Near what?"

"The 'bottomless pit.' That is what I would call it, anyhow."

"Is there such a place in this infernal mine?"

"There is. You can throw a stone into it and not hear it drop. I don't know how deep it is. Ah, here we are," and Kemble waved his light over his head and pointed forward.

Rustling Rob looked ahead, but said nothing. His hands had been fastened upon his back by his captors, and he had presented to them all the time a cold stern face.

"Go straight ahead, Rob," spoke the young overseer.

For the first time since the capture the traitor paled.

"The 'bottomless pit' lies right in your path and you seem to know it. March."

Rustling Rob hesitated. Ten steps ahead yawned a pit rightly called "bottomless." The light streaming from Kyd Kemble's bunched matches did not begin to penetrate its depths.

"This is murder," he said at last. "You are not going to force me to step from the rim of this horrid basin?"

"Why not?" smiled the overseer.

"I would be crushed to death by the fall."

"Exactly."

"Forward!" cried Joe Bundy at this juncture. "We can't wait till the Day of Judgment on ye. Move ahead. We will find the girl without you."

In an instant Rustling Rob whirled upon the old miner and looked him fairly in the eye.

"What has this old interloper got to do with this affair?" he exclaimed.

"More than you want 'im ter have!" was the quick retort. "I'm on hand jest whar I'm not wanted by young rascals like you. Tell us where the girl is and you need not march over the brink of the pit."

"I won't."

The last word had scarcely fallen from Rustling Rob's tongue ere the hard hand of Old Joe had gripped his arm.

"You won't, eh? That's the end of the argument. This way, please."

Joe Bundy rushed ahead dragging the frightened and unwilling Rob after him. Kyd Kemble following with the light and a smile on his face, showed Joe the way, and on the very brink of what seemed a terrible pit, he halted with his captive.

"I hope ye won't fall very hard," grinned Old Joe. "I don't know the exact distance, but ef thar's no bottom it'll be a long drep. I don't think you'll find a tick ter alight on, Mr. Rob; but I hope you'll fare well."

He had forced Rustling Rob to the very edge of the yawning place. One of the youth's feet was knocking loose some stones on the brink,

and in another moment he would be falling down—down to a terrible end.

"Hold!" he cried drawing back. "Don't carry out your infamous design. I don't propose to be murdered to keep in that awful pit an Indian's secret."

Old Joe did not seem willing to forego his intentions, for he did not obey but held Rustling Rob over the edge as before.

"Mercy! mercy!" yelled the rancher. "Don't let him carry out his intentions, Kyd. I'll tell all I know."

Joe Bundy and the young overseer exchanged looks and both smiled.

"You're right sure you'll tell the truth, are ye?" asked Joe.

"I am."

The hand of the old miner drew Rustling Rob back from the brink of the pit, and he leaned against the wall catching second breath and trying to recover from his terrible fright. He was now a picture of terror and one comical enough to provoke a smile on the leathery face of Old Joe.

"We'll take the truth now," said the tall miner after a brief pause. "Which way do we move?"

Rustling Rob started up as if glad to finish the adventure and get out of the hands that held him.

"This way," cried he, moving off.

For ten minutes the little party threaded the cave and at last the unwilling guide stopped and pointed at a wall that seemed to lose itself in the darkness overhead.

"I left her beyond that," said he.

"But what's the door?"

"Go to the left yonder and you will turn a sharp corner. Stoop and crawl upon all-fours and you will enter a chamber where you can stand erect."

"But you?"

"I don't care to see her. I will wait for you here."

"You go with us or remain here dead!" cried old Joe, seizing the traitor by the scruff of his neck. "We don't stand any foolishness, young man," and once more he was dragging Rob over the stony floor.

Rustling Rob, seeing that he could not outwit the old mine-hunter, submitted, though with ill grace, and offered to become more tractable. He led the way to the low-ceiled passage, was pushed forward with a revolver at his head, and in a few minutes a female figure sprung toward the little party with a cry of joy, and a mad ejaculation fell from old Joe's lips when he saw that a rope ran from one of the young girl's feet to the wall at her back.

She could go so far and no further.

In a flash the miner whirled upon Rustling Rob.

"Did you do that?" he cried, pointing at the rope.

There was no answer. The face of the traitor was white.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE FRINGE OF THE STORM.

It was morning once more in the camp of the Red Jacket Bravos along the little stream known as the Rio Tagus. The sun creeping up over the hills that lay beyond the river touched the scenery with a brilliant brush, and showed the outlines of the tall trees and the darker faces of the bandits.

Riding toward the camp on a horse that was well fitted for a long jaunt through that peculiar region, was a man who sat his steed like one born for the saddle. He was extremely handsome and a quantity of long black hair streamed from beneath his wide sombrero like a black banner.

He was riding from the north and seemed anxious to reach the home of the tribute-collector of the border.

When he reached a hillock from which he could look down upon Captain Red Jacket's camp, he drew rein and let a smile illumine his face.

"We are going to have a little fun," said this rider. "I had my brush with the young Indian last night and I find that he is no insignificant foe. I fired right into his face and did not kill him; but, thanks to the dim starlight, I succeeded in eluding him. We are going to have some fun, Captain Cussed; the avengers of Mesquite Ranch are coming."

He gazed upon the camp awhile longer and then rode down the hill and entered it. He was not immediately discovered, but when he was, the name "Dolores Dick" could be heard on every hand.

The handsome outlaw rode to where Captain

Red Jacket stood looking half moodily at a young person who was enjoying his breakfast, as if he was not a prisoner closely watched by as heartless a set of men as ever caught a young ranch-owner.

"Ah, you have him, I see!" exclaimed Dolores Dick, joining the bandit leader. "You have the young ranch prince of the Southwest. What does he say about the ransom?"

"Just what he might be expected to say," smiled Captain Red Jacket. "He declares that not one dollar of his treasure shall go to ransom him from us. He talks coolly about it. There's blood in his veins, and devilish good blood, too."

"I knew that. He expects a rescue, doesn't he?"

"He has intimated nothing about it if he does."

"But they are on the trail!"

"Who are?"

"The men of the ranch."

"Led by that long fellow called Joe Bundy—the old half crazy bonanza-hunter?"

"They are led by the young Indian—by Red Hawk, the Apache."

"The one who fought fire at the ranch? I recollect him."

"They have sworn to rescue Mustang Merle from our hands, besides paying us back for our swoop upon the ranch."

"They do, eh?"

Captain Red Jacket glanced toward the Boy Rancher.

At that moment the young breakfaster looked up and for the first time caught sight of Dolores Dick. In another instant he was on his feet and was coming forward.

"You weren't so penitent after all," he said, halting in front of Dick. "You said you were going to desert Captain Red Jacket, and your pretty tale, spun for a purpose, was all that saved you from the vengeance of the men from my ranch. Now you are back with your old master—are hand-in-glove with him. Birds of a feather seldom fall out when they have a nest in common."

The handsome face of Dolores Dick lost color a moment, but it was soon back once more.

"Why don't you go back and rebuild your ranch?" he asked. "Mesquite is a pretty place and—"

"Rebuild it to be fired again by a lot of villains like those I see around me?" was the quick rejoinder. "No, not one stone shall rise upon another until the debt of fire and blood has been canceled and the vultures of the Southwest have been punished for their last infamy."

"I guess that means us, Dick," laughed Captain Red Jacket laying his hand upon his lieutenant's arm.

"It means you, sir," continued Mustang Merle. "I had no thought of any one else when I spoke the words. The day of vengeance will come."

"With you in our hands?" queried Dolores Dick.

There was no reply.

The two men turned and walked away followed by the eyes of the young captive.

Dolores Dick was speaking to Captain Red Jacket in low tones and Mustang Merle could see that the conversation was of great importance.

All at once the captain called several members of his band to his side, gave them orders, and saw them saddle their horses and ride away.

"I know now what has happened," thought Merle. "The boys have taken the trail. Dolores Dick, the spy, has reported and Captain Red Jacket is making his arrangements accordingly."

There now remained no doubt in Merle's mind of the import of the news brought in by Dolores Dick. The brigands looking to their fire-arms, besides casting significant glances over the hills beyond the camp, as if they expected to see an enemy advance from that direction.

Slowly fled the hours of that long day. Mustang Merle watched the shadows steal from the west as the sun went down behind the hills, and when night came the Red Jackets were stationed with a view to repelling an attack.

Now he was watched with more vigilance than ever. He had the eyes of Dolores Dick upon him, and he saw that the Apollo of the bandits took a fiendish delight in keeping him in sight.

No fires were permitted in the camp along the river and the bandits had to go hungry when the hour for supper came.

Captain Red Jacket stood against a tree receiving messages from scouts who came in every now and then, and when at last one came

with a single word which Merle of Mesquite could not catch, he started forward and stopped in front of Dolores Dick.

"You know your orders," cried the captain of the Red Jackets, pointing at the Boy Rancher. "You will carry them out to the letter."

Dolores Dick touched the broad white brim of his hat and saw his chief walk away.

"Do you know what is taking place?" asked Dolores Dick, leaning toward Merle.

"My boys are out yonder?" was the reply, the gaze of the young captive wandering over the dark hilltops.

"You are right. The avengers and would-be rescuers have come, but they don't know what we are, nor what will follow the first shot."

"What will follow it, Captain Dick?"

Dolores Dick looked at the hills before he replied.

"If we should be hard pressed by desperate fighting—though we are no mean fighters ourselves—Mesquite Ranch is to lose its owner, swiftly and surely."

"By your hand?"

"I am to carry out Captain Red Jacket's orders. I always do that."

"Then, if you are hard pressed, as you say, I am to be shot dead in my tracks?"

Dolores Dick did not speak, but speech was unnecessary, for Mustang Merle understood the look he sent beyond the little camp.

A few minutes of suspense followed this brief conversation and all at once the form of Captain Red Jacket appeared at Dolores Dick's side.

"They have come, but we will prove too much for them," he said. "I have posted the boys and the ambush will annihilate the whole gang."

How the blood of Mustang Merle leaped through his veins at these words, each one of which he distinctly heard. He could not move. His hands were not only bound at his back, but a rope, extending from his ankle to the tree, prevented him from moving beyond a certain distance from the spot.

"The ambush is the coward's resort!" cried he, looking at Captain Red Jacket.

In an instant he had the leader of the border ruffians leering into his face.

"We will show your men," cried the bandit. "We have a trap prepared for them and they will ride into it and lose their precious heads."

"Not if Red Hawk is with them," thought Merle. "I have great confidence in that young Indian."

Once more Captain Red Jacket fell back and with another look at Dolores Dick vanished in the darkness. Beyond the confines of the camp all was still. He rode over the hill and joined a man who crouched panther-like on the ground, and who was staring his eyes straight ahead.

"Where are they?" whispered the man.

"Out yonder in council," was the reply.

"And the boys?"

"They are ready and wait for the signal."

"Have all come?"

"It appears so."

"Then it shall be extermination unless—"

Captain Red Jacket did not finish the last sentence but backed off and vanished.

In the camp, guarded now by Dolores Dick, stood Mustang Merle at the tree. He saw his guard steal off a few feet and listen for sounds which he expected to come over the hill. A bat flew across his face, brushing one cheek with the sharp tip of its wing, and a snake crawled over one of his feet.

The silence was almost palpable—the dread calm before the onset of the cyclone.

Gently something touched Mustang Merle's hand. Dolores Dick was twenty feet away with his face turned toward the hills; the Boy Rancher could just make out his figure.

Merle withdrew his hand when it was touched, but at the same time turned his head. He saw something that thrilled him—something which was more human-like than the tree to which he was secured, and it was crouched at his feet; but in the faint light that came down from above, he saw the long, slender blade of a knife.

A thought of Red Hawk rushed across his mind.

CHAPTER XIV.

OUT OF THE TRAP.

THRILLED into silence, which meant safety to him, Mustang Merle looked again at the listening and half crouching figure of Dolores Dick.

The lieutenant of the Red Jackets seemed to be waiting for the signal from the front and for a moment had forgotten the prisoner he had been told to watch. If he should turn back the crawl of the red-skin through the lines might

amount to nothing, and Dick might pay for the turn with his life.

A second seemed an hour to the young rancher of Mesquite.

All at once he felt something tug with the rope that secured his leg to the tree. There was a sharp, solid cut and the strand parted, then the same knife came up until it touched his wrist and the cords which had secured his hands fell off. He was free, but it seemed to him that he durst not move.

"Come!" said a voice in the faintest whisper that could reach his ears, and Merle fell back.

At that moment Dolores Dick came toward the tree. Until this time the handsome desperado did not know anything of the events taking place around him, but he soon discovered that something was wrong.

Merle was in the act of bounding away when something dark shot past him. It landed like a springing panther upon the bosom of Dolores Dick; the Bravo, thrown off his guard by the suddenness of the attack, was pushed back and almost fell to the ground. He had the hands of Red Hawk at his throat!

Merle stood spellbound near the tree. He saw the young Apache fall upon Dolores Dick and felt that the knife which had freed him would soon finish the career of the Apollo of the Southwest. And why should he interfere? Had not Dolores Dick helped to destroy Mesquite, and had he not come back and played spy where he would have been hanged if some had not been deceived by his professed penitence?

There was no cry on the bandit's part, as though the red hand, gripped at his throat, was choking down anything of the kind; then, to finish the struggle, an arm rose and fell and Red Hawk sprung back to the breathless boy nabob.

"Now," said the young Indian, and the two ran from the camp, left it under cover of some trees and glided toward the hills through a ravine among which they hurried until they were stopped by the voice of a guard.

A minute later Mustang Merle found himself among his own men, and the rough but brave fellows of Mesquite clustered around him and offered their hasty and heartfelt congratulations.

"No time for this, boys," said Merle. "We are nearly surrounded by the Bravos of the Tagus. They have set a trap for us, but just where it is I cannot say."

"What if we don't swallow the bait?" asked one of the ranchers.

"They may catch us anyhow."

"How do you like it?" cried a strange voice at this juncture.

With one accord the men of Mesquite looked up. The sound seemed to come down from the tops of the cliffs which rose far above the bed of the ravine into which they had ridden, and from which Red Hawk had stolen on his self-imposed task of releasing Merle from the hands of Captain Red Jacket.

"They are above us," said Merle.

"That's evident," was the response. "We are in the trap now; but the gulch has a mouth. We came in here by it."

The men of Mesquite sat upon their steeds with their revolvers firmly gripped, looking up at the hill-tops as if they were seeking a glimpse of the person who had spoken.

"Hands up!" cried the same stern voice. "Hands up and pistols down, every mother's son of you!"

"Is that you, captain?" asked Merle.

The dead silence which followed this query seemed to proclaim the consternation it had caused. Captain Red Jacket must have recognized the voice of his late prisoner.

"Go back to camp—quick!" those below heard him say at last. "See what has happened there."

"We must ride for the mouth of the ravine for we can't fight Captain Cussed here," whispered Merle to his faithfuls. "Ready, all of you."

They could not see what was transpiring on the hills; they did not catch sight of the man who was running over the rough ground toward the camp to bring back to the leader of the Bravos a story terrible enough to fill him with new oaths.

"We're ready, Cap'n Merle," said half a dozen voices in reply to the Boy Rancher's last sentence.

"Ride! If they meet us at the mouth of the ravine ride through them."

The men of Mesquite were only too eager for a job of this nature. In an instant spurs were thrust into the rowels of the faithful steeds, and all at once every one sprung forward and were riding like the wind.

Bullets fired from overhead dropped all around them, striking the rocks of the ravines, or cutting the garments of the riders.

Not a shot was returned. The riders bent their heads to the leaden blast and kept on, though several reeled in their saddles as the bullets struck flesh or bone.

"They are at the mouth of the gulch!" cried one of the ranchmen. "We're in for it, sure enough."

"Straight ahead!" answered Mustang Merle.

The following instant a sheet of flame burst upon the gallant riders, but it was instantly returned, and the steeds of Mesquite kept on. The desperadoes at the mouth of the gulch were almost literally ridden down. The horses of the men of the ranch were driven upon them, and for ten seconds a battle was fought under the stars that showered their light upon the scene. It became a hand-to-hand grapple at last; the Mesquites against the Red Jackets, and deeds were performed there which none but the actual participants saw.

Forced to give ground by the fury of the onset which they could not resist, the raiders were driven from the immediate mouth of the gulch, thus opening a door for the ranchmen, and through it they rode to draw rein half a mile from the scene and there count their losses.

All were there but three and one of these was Red Hawk the young Apache.

No one had seen the Indian fall beneath the aim of a raider, but the young brave's absence told a story which Merle did not want to think of.

"We don't quit this country without knowing Red Hawk's fate," said the Boy Rancher with resolution. "He risked his life for me and him I will not desert. Besides, this is but the opening skirmish of the war of extermination between Mesquite and Red Jacket."

The men received this speech with expressions of approval and all swore new allegiance to Mustang Merle and promised to follow wherever he led.

Meantime scenes as interesting were taking place near the little river and within the desperadoes' camp. Captain Red Jacket in a towering rage was marching back and forth in front of a man who sat on a log watching him with a grim smile.

"Why didn't you watch him better?" cried the captain, halting suddenly and glaring at the man who was handsome and the possessor of a shower of long black hair.

"I did my best," was the tart answer.

"But you let some one steal upon the prisoner and cut him loose. You admit this."

Under his sweeping mustache the accused person—Dolores Dick—bit his lip.

"Do we part, captain?" he said, rising and choking back his rage. "I can go elsewhere. I have served you all these long months for this. Your hand, if you want Dolores Dick to touch it in farewell."

The dark-faced spectators of this scene said nothing, but looked at the two men. They saw Captain Red Jacket fall back as if he intended to refuse the extended hand, but he caught the men's expression and went forward.

"I won't stand between this camp and your going," he cried. "You let a prisoner escape—an Indian outwitted you. You have obeyed my every command—until now."

"And never again!" fell from the lips of Dolores Dick. "I hate the people out yonder. I have always hated the boy owner of the ranch. I will not go over to him, but I will prove a thorn in his side fighting my own battles, for I have a debt to pay—one which he does not dream of. Dolores Dick has never told Mustang Merle why he hates him, but the time is coming when the boy shall know. Then let him sell or desert his ranch, for I will render it unfit for human habitation, and the bat will shun its darkest corners."

Dolores Dick pressed his right hand hard against his bosom while he talked, and those who listened knew that every word caused him terrible pain, for the knife of Red Hawk had found the body of the handsome raider.

The man stepped back as he finished. He walked to where his horse stood, and drawing himself up into the saddle he looked down upon those who were watching him.

The next second he had touched his hat to all, and with a smile on his face, white but pleasant, he rode away, going out of camp in a direction opposite the spot where at that very moment Mustang Merle and his followers were holding a council of war.

Captain Red Jacket looked after his lieutenant until he was out of sight, when he turned upon his men.

"I outlaw that man!" cried he. "I proclaim him outlaw from this moment. He let the young prisoner escape. We have lost a golden ransom by his treachery. We could have stripped the secret vaults of Mesquite but for his act. He has shaken gold from our hands and caused the sudden loss of the fortune we had just secured. For time and severity would have brought Mustang Merle to terms. Yes, I outlaw Dolores Dick. Any one is at liberty to shoot him on sight. Now, gentlemen, for the enemy at our door."

The desperadoes looked at one another but said nothing. Their minds were busy; but it was evident that Captain Red Jacket's speech had caused a sudden revulsion of feeling. They now regarded Dolores Dick as a traitor, for when Mustang Merle escaped they lost a prospective ransom which might have filled their purses with the gold of the richest ranch in the Southwest.

Once outside the camp where he had narrowly escaped with his life, Dolores Dick rode fast, his wound having been hastily and roughly dressed by one of his late comrades.

A singular smile played at intervals with his lips and his eyes got now and then a malicious twinkle.

"The Indian did it—the young Indian who is the boy nabob's companion!" mused he. "The boy stood by and let him ply the knife. Of course, I did not expect to see him interfere, for wasn't I to make it impossible for his men to rescue him if I thought we were losing the battle? And I am an outlaw now—outlawed by the man I have served, and whose life I even saved once at the risk of my own. Dolores Dick, the Proscribed. How does that sound?"

The man stopped in the middle of a little valley where clumps of young trees rose like groups of little ghosts. He pulled himself up in his stirrups until he stood erect, took off his hat and wiped his brow, pushing back masses of dark hair.

"I own no master from this night," he exclaimed. "I am my own master. I have no one to bow to and no man shall say to me: 'Do this.' I am the Ishmael of the border. I am free to ride where I please and if they set a price on my head I am at liberty to return the compliment with interest. Hurrah for Dolores Dick, the Proscribed! My hand is against every person and especially against Merle of Mesquite. And he doesn't know why, ha, ha. But he will live to learn."

CHAPTER XV.

GRAY EAGLE COMES BACK.

THE day after the battle in the ravine nothing remained to show how fierce it had been. The spot of the bandits' camp was deserted, and no signs of Merle and his friends were visible.

Far from the scene of the hot encounter a little troop of horsemen were riding slowly across a level stretch of country. They were stalwart-looking fellows, dark of skin and all wore peculiar hats, each one of which was adorned with a black feather.

Captain Red Jacket and his men were riding across a bit of country which they had traversed before, but not on the mission which now called forth their riding powers. The day was hot and the sun beat down upon the brigands of the Southwest; vultures hovered high above them in the blue, and every now and then they started a coyote, or rode over a skeleton shining in the sand.

"They have gone back to the ranch and we must follow them," said the captain, to the man who rode at his right. "It is now war to the knife between us, and the boy nabob who has defied our power. We shall teach him a lesson he will never forget and when it has been properly taught he won't want to inhabit this part of God's creation."

Captain Reddy spoke with bitterness, and the men who heard looked at one another and smiled.

By and by the horsemen quickened their pace and in a short time all were galloping over the ground, their feathers fluttering in the wind and their weapons shining in the sunlight.

Mustang Merle and his followers had disappeared after the fight at the mouth of the ravine. They had withdrawn, as though they had had enough of the contest, but this was not the secret of their disappearance.

Already they were far from the spot riding toward Mesquite Ranch, Merle leading them and looking ahead with an anxious face.

It was a thought of Lona that was taking him

back to the burned ranch. He had left the girl somewhere in the hands of Gray Eagle and Rustling Rob the traitor, and Red Hawk had informed him that Old Joe Bundy had remained behind for the purpose of tracking the Indian to Lona's hiding-place, if possible.

"That old fellow is worth his weight in gold," exclaimed Mustang Merle when he had heard this piece of news. "He's a diamond in the rough, and I am glad I ran across him while he was trying to find the lost mines."

Red Hawk looked at Merle and then touched his arm.

"The lost mines may not be so far away after all, white brother," said the young Apache. "They may be very close, for, as I have said, Gray Eagle has held the same kind of map the old man has carried so long, and, then, did he not rob Old Joe when he stabbed him in the ravine?"

"You are right, Red Hawk. Gray Eagle may know something about the lost mine."

Red Hawk had been found after the fight and Merle was not obliged to remain near the Tagus and fight for his rescue.

All were now on the way back to Mesquite, and the word was that when Lona had been found they would turn against Captain Red Jacket and his outlaws and finish the war forever. The men of the ranch were eager to do this and everything indicated that they would rejoice to exterminate the merciless tribute-collectors of the border.

It was getting dark when the little band came in sight of Mesquite.

The valley in which it lay was as still as death and from the hill upon whose summit they drew rein they could not see a sign of human life.

At a given signal from Merle all galloped down the rise and were soon riding across the plain.

They were moving along the road leading to the burned house when the click of a rifle-lock was heard and a voice startled all:

"Halt thar!"

Merle and his friends drew rein and laid their hands upon their weapons:

"Bless me ef I don't b'lieve it's the boy," said the same voice.

"Joe!" cried the young rancher, and the response was as prompt as pleasant.

"Old Joe it is. Advance and make yerselves at home."

The next moment the troop surrounded the tall figure of Joe Bundy and the old fellow was leaning toward Merle and telling him something which brightened his anxious face.

"Forward!" cried Merle and the whole troop rode on again, nor stopped until the horses had carried them to the ruins of the ranch.

There a young girl ran forward and was embraced by Merle with an exclamation of joy.

It was Lona!

"We didn't bring the traitor out of the mine," said Joe, addressing the men to whom he had told the story of Lona's rescue in the cavern. "We jest left him thar, for Gray Eagle is comin' back soon and we concluded he'd like ter find his ally on guard whar he'd left him. Rustlin' Rob didn't show much penitence until I war about ter walk him over the edge of the 'bottomless pit,' and then he took water. I didn't intend ter toss him over for he had a secret what we wanted and we concluded that we wouldn't get it at all ef we chucked him over the edge. He's safe in the mine, and when Gray Eagle comes back he's apt ter walk inter a trap which he'll never forget."

Already Merle had met Kyd Kemble and the two had exchanged apologies, so that they were no longer suspicious of one another, not the Boy Rancher knew that Rustling Rob, not his overseer, was the Apache's ally in the abduction of Lona.

"Do you really think that the cavern is the lost mine, Joe?" asked Merle.

"I don't think anything else. I have investigated as well as I could, and I find marks of picks on the walls and they weren't put thar lately, either. You find them everywhar in the old place. Would you mind goin' down?"

"Now?"

"Now. The boys ar' well fixed, and they don't expect a brush with captain to-night."

Ten minutes later Mustang Merle and Joe Bundy were walking toward the cavern. The night was starlit, and they could easily pick their way over the trail leading to the ravine. Joe guided the young rancher to the entrance of the cave, and in a short time they were far beyond it, and in the very heart of the place.

Old Joe showed Merle the marks he had referred to, and they saw them plainly by the aid of the torches they carried.

"This place has been worked, but years and years ago," said Merle. "It must be the mine mentioned on the map you carried so long, and which Gray Eagle took from you when he stabbed you in the gulch the night he came down over the wall on the rope. This cavern of wealth is on my land."

"Sartainly," grinned Old Joe. "Kyd and I settled that when we came out and looked at the lay of the land. Thar's nothing like it this side o' Californy. Gray Eagle knew whar it was all the time, and he had Lona's prison fixed in his mind before he came down with his bucks ter carry out his part o' the plot."

Old Joe had hardly ceased talking when a loud report was heard, and Mustang Merle fell against the wall, dropping his torch and sliding to the base of the stone.

"Jehosaphat!" cried Joe Bundy, rushing forward, but with a revolver in his hand.

Another shot was heard, and the torch which Bundy carried was knocked from his grasp and fell down, down until he lost sight of it, and the place was as dark as Egypt.

Mustang Merle, stunned, not struck, by the bullet, was soon upon his feet, and the two friends stood in the gloom waiting for the next move on the part of the underground assassin.

"Who was it?" whispered the Boy Rancher.

"It might have been Gray Eagle, though I don't think he has come back. My bird may have broken from the cage—"

"Rustling Rob?"

"Yes."

"What became of the torches?"

"They fell down, down until I couldn't see 'em any more, they went so far."

"Then we must be near another pit?"

"We are. Don't move to the right. One step might be fatal."

For ten minutes the two friends stood like statues in the dark. At the end of this time a strange sound like the peculiar cry of a night-bird, saluted their ears.

"That's the signal," said Joe, in low tones.

"It's the same one I heard when I first came here. Gray Eagle isn't far off, and if he don't watch out, he may not get ter take his feathers home."

The signal was answered from another part of the cavern, and then silence reigned again.

"If they meet, with their knowledge of this mine they may make it hot for us," continued Merle.

Old Joe said nothing.

"From the last signal, some one seems to be between us and the entrance."

"Hush; some one is coming down the corridor."

Merle could not hear a sound of any kind, but he did not dispute the old miner's words, and stood silent, leaving all to his gaunt ally.

If he could have pierced the gloom which lay on every side, he would have seen the crouching form of Joe Bundy within ten feet of his position, waiting for the feet his keen ears had heard in the passage.

All at once there came a sound which almost drove Mustang Merle forward with a cry of horror, for he knew that two human beings, had collided in the dark, and that they were fighting on the very verge of the bottomless pit.

His blood seemed to congeal with horror while he stood there and heard the death grapple of the unseen, one of whom he knew must be Old Joe.

Once he thought of lighting a match and looking at the struggle, but the thought of another enemy in the cavern who might be watching with a deadly weapon deterred him, and he waited in the dark for the end of the battle.

It lasted but a few seconds, but to Mustang Merle they seemed hours of torture.

At length some one fell against the Boy Rancher and then stood erect, breathing hard.

Merle fell back and kept his revolver in front of his face.

Who was there—Joe or his enemy?

"Whar ar' ye, Merle?" asked a low voice at last, sending the young rancher's heart into his throat for joy.

In response Merle put out his hand and touched a sleeve. It was Joe's.

"Where is he?" queried the boy.

"Don't ask me. I'm tremblin' yet," was the reply. "Three times I war half-way over the infernal pit, and it took all my strength ter get back. He went over."

"Into the pit?"

"Inter it, Merle."

"Who was he?"

"Gray Eagle, the Apache."

"Thank Heaven!" cried the young nabob.

"We are rid of that implacable foe."

"Come now; let's get out o' this underground bell. May I never enter it ag'in!"

They groped their way back and at last emerged from the cavern, from the mouth of which they returned to the ranch, where Merle made a singular discovery.

Old Joe's hair had turned white. The horror of his struggle on the brink of the bottomless pit had robbed it of its raven blackness.

CHAPTER XVI.

"MESQUITE OR DEATH."

It looked as if peace and security had once more come back to Mesquite Ranch.

The men had erected a temporary dwelling near where the first one had stood and no signs were seen of Captain Red Jacket and his band. Old Joe and Red Hawk, scouting in the vicinity, could not report a foe anywhere, and the glow began to come back to Lona's cheeks.

"It's only the calm before the storm," said the tall miner to Mustang Merle one afternoon. "The cloud is formin' somewhar in the sky, and it'll soon show itself."

And sure enough it did.

A beautiful day was drawing to its close when Red Hawk, coming in from a ride over the country, beckoned to Merle, and the two walked across the little pasture together.

"I saw a horseman down along the river to-day!" said the young Indian.

"One of the Red Jackets?"

Red Hawk nodded.

"It was Dolores Dick."

"Oh, the fellow you cut when you rescued me from Captain Cussed?"

"The same."

"He has come back to spy out the land," smiled Merle. "Well, we will watch out for him."

The Apache made no reply, but cast his eye over the land ahead and seemed to scan it closely.

"Dolores Dick did not wear the feather of the Red Jackets," said he at last. "Indeed, he wore another sort of hat."

"To deceive us, maybe."

"He did not wear the usual garb of the raiders."

"But wore his long hair?"

"Yes; he had that still."

"What do you think, Red Hawk?"

"Something has come between Dick and his captain. He is no longer with the band."

"A falling out, eh?"

"Why not? He let you get away, you recollect?"

"Because he couldn't help it!" cried the Boy Rancher.

"I think Dolores Dick is an outlaw," replied Red Hawk. "But what is that creeping along over the ground yonder?"

The dark hand of the Apache youth indicated a figure moving over the ground some distance from where they stood, and Mustang Merle after a short study of it, as he could see it, pronounced it a man.

"I will run down to yon point and get a good look at him as he crosses the trail," said the Indian. "Watch here, as he may turn back, and if he comes within shot, halt him."

In another moment Red Hawk was gone, and Mustang Merle saw him running toward the spot he had designated.

The master of the ranch now watched and waited for the Indian's return, but at the same time he kept an eye on the place where he had last seen the creeping figure.

Ten minutes passed away, and the shadows grew longer over the rolling country.

All was still where Red Hawk had disappeared, and not a sign of the creeper could be discerned.

Suddenly Merle was startled by a sound on his right. He turned quickly and grasped his revolver at the sight that presented itself.

Not fifty yards away, and coming toward him on a horse, was a man he recognized at once.

It was Dolores Dick, the outlaw.

His body was partly concealed by the body of his black steed, and though Mustang Merle threw up his weapon, the man in the saddle did not stop.

"Halt!" cried the master of Mesquite. "Halt Captain Dick, or I will tumble you from the saddle."

"You will, eh?" was the answer, followed by a laugh. "I guess you won't do anything of the kind," and on came the bandit until his animal's head almost touched the boy's hand.

Fear of being ridden down caused Mustang Merle to spring aside, and though he tried to get

a shot at the raider, he was frustrated, and the next moment, to his horror, he saw Dick lean toward him and grip his shoulder. It was a grip from which Merle could not release himself, and he was lifted from the ground, and in a jiffy was lying across the saddle, in Dolores Dick's power.

"You look just like your mother, boy," said the outlaw.

"My mother?" cried Merle. "Did you know my mother?"

"Didn't I?" was the response. "Didn't I know her for the most beautiful girl in all our country, and when she became the wife of Captain Bordren, didn't I tell her that I would live to pay her back for her rejection of Dick from Dolores? And ain't I paying her back now?"

How the eyes that looked down upon Merle flashed while these words were spoken! How the hand of the outlaw tightened on the boy's arm!

"My mother has been dead these ten years," said Merle.

"I know that; but that doesn't make me hate you any the less. They have made an outlaw of me, but I am not powerless because of that. My hand is against every man, and especially against you, though I expect I will be hunted down one of these days, and finish my course with my boots on."

The black horse was galloping leisurely over the ground, all the time carrying Mustang Merle further and further from the old ranch. He wondered if Red Hawk had yet missed him, and was thinking about the young Indian, when Dolores Dick said:

"I fooled that young Indian of yours to-night. He was trying to cut me off, but I took an advantage of him and flanked him nicely, picking you up without any trouble."

Merle made no reply.

"You won't be at home when the captain swoops down upon the ranch to-night."

"What, is he coming to-night?"

"He will be there," smiled Dolores Dick. "He is going to carry the war into Africa, and this time he won't leave a single steer on the place. He has formed all his plans. How's the mine? Has Old Joe found it yet?"

Merle was in no humor for such talk. He saw gloom and death ahead for the friends he had left behind, and felt that if Captain Red Jacket should swoop down upon the ranch unperceived by the pickets, its destruction was inevitable.

On, on across the darkening landscape went Dolores Dick and his prisoner.

"Whither are you taking me?" asked the Boy Rancher.

"Wait and see," was the answer. "The outlaw has a home. Even Dolores Dick has somewhere to lay his head. I am living for vengeance, and, as I have told you, my hand is against every man."

They rode on some miles in silence after this. Merle, looking up, studied the handsome face of the man who had caught him. He now saw it plainly in the soft light of the stars, and while he looked he tried to form some plan of escape.

But how could he escape, unaided, from the clutches of such an outlaw?

The black horse was large and strong, and capable of carrying them a long distance without fatigue. But he was moving from Mesquite, and Captain Red Jacket and his men were about to swoop down upon it once more!

This was what sorely troubled him.

Suddenly Dolores Dick reined in his steed and listened.

"They're moving along the slope over there," he said, pointing toward the west. "The captain and his boys are now going to their feast at Mesquite."

The sounds of a moving cavalcade were now distinct enough to enable Mustang Merle to catch them all, and he listened with feelings not to be described.

Oh! for Dolores Dick's black steed that he might outride the marauders and warn the people at the ranch.

"You'd like to head them off, wouldn't you?" laughed the outlaw, looking down into his prisoner's face. "If you had my horse you'd do it, I suppose?"

"Wouldn't I?" cried the boy nabob. "I'd kill your horse but what I headed off the bandits of the Southwest, and they would meet with the warmest reception of their infamous lives when they struck Old Mesquite."

Dolores Dick laughed again, and then listened to the sounds still easily heard.

"Let's see if we can't get a glimpse of them," said he, suddenly, wheeling his steed about.

"We might do this without letting them know that we are here."

In a moment he was riding toward the sounds, and the young rancher was wondering what would happen next.

In a little while Dolores Dick drew rein, and sat in his saddle looking with his prisoner at a dark line moving across the open ground before them.

Voices came floating across the country to their ears and Dick and Merle recognized the tones of Captain Cussed, the Bravo. The bandits were in merry mood and some were singing in low voice or telling rough stories as they rode along. They were in no hurry to reach Mesquite for the hour was not late enough for the attack; they preferred to swoop down upon the ranch at the dead of night and carry all before them with an impetuous rush.

"What think you now, boy?" asked Dolores Dick, looking down into the young rancher's face.

There was no reply for a moment.

"They won't leave one timber standing if they are permitted to have their way. This is a raid of extermination. Captain Cussed is a host in himself and with his men he is well nigh invincible. Don't you wish you were free to head him off and save the old ranch?"

"I do, Captain Dick; I won't conceal the truth from you," was the answer, and the two rode on in silence, but listening to the voices that came over the plain.

"Do you know," said Dolores Dick, "that Captain Red Jacket bears a charmed life—that he says that the bullet which is to kill him is not yet molded?"

"Ah, does he say that?"

"He does and believes it, too. I have seen him in some desperate encounters, when I would not have given anything for his life, and he has come out unscathed."

"But his time will come. You know, Captain Dick, that every dog has his day."

A smile for a moment wreathed the handsome face of the outlaw.

"I don't blame you for hating Captain Cussed," he said. "I don't like him myself. I am his outlaw and he has set a price upon my head, as you know. Listen to that song. It is the favorite chorus of the Red Jacket Bravos."

Mustang Merle leaned toward the sound and heard the chorus of the rough riders of the border.

Every tone was distinct, and he thought he could distinguish the voice of his enemy, the Captain of the Bravos.

"You say you hate Captain Cussed, yet you will not let me go that I may get even with him," he said.

"I will not. I don't let young foxes like you out of my trap. Ha, ha!"

"He will hunt you one of these days."

"I look for that, for am I not an Ishmael of the Southwest? There was a time when I stood next to Captain Red Jacket in the esteem of those fellows; but now at his command they will turn and hunt me down like a mad wolf."

The Boy Rancher could not help admiring the face and figure of his captor.

Dolores Dick spoke with a good deal of feeling. It was evident that he liked some of the men with whom he had served on many a border foray.

"They're turning off now—bearing a little to the right, which means that they are fairly on the trail to Mesquite," he remarked, a moment later. Mustang Merle realized this with a thrill.

Oh, for a horse and rein and spur for a little while. He could yet head off the plunderers of the land.

"By Jove, some one's behind us!" suddenly cried Dick. "The band is traveling in two parts and—"

He did not complete the sentence for he was staring at three horsemen who had approached to within a few yards of where he had halted, and to move would be to betray his position to the trio.

It was a perilous moment and Mustang Merle watched the three horsemen with as much curiosity as did his captor.

"Hello thar!" rung out a rough voice, and at the same moment the three turned toward Dolores Dick.

"Curse them, they've seen us!" growled Captain Red Jacket's outlawed lieutenant. "But thank fortune, I have the best steed in the country," and all at once the black horse sprang forward, and the next moment was carrying his two riders over the ground as though he had wings and not hoofs.

The three men answered with a yell and dashed forward in pursuit.

Dolores Dick sent back a challenge that echoed far and wide on the night air and the chase had begun.

Though the gallant black steed exerted himself to his utmost, he had a double burden and this soon became apparent to the outlaw and his young prisoner.

The three were gaining on him, and the raider looking over his shoulder, saw them pushing forward with a determination to take him alive.

All at once there rung out several shots, and the bullets were heard to sing as they passed near Dick and Merle.

"What if they should hit Dick?" thought the boy who had spoken but little since the beginning of the exciting chase.

They were now in a small valley where the tall young trees shaded it in every direction, and it was apparent to Merle that Dick hoped to elude his pursuers there. A trail ran through the valley and the black horse kept it well despite the shadows that prevailed.

Dolores Dick sent back with curses all demands for his surrender, and after the last one the shots became more frequent. At the edge of the valley a volley was fired.

"Ho!" cried the outlaw, dropping the rein. "They've winged me, Merle, but not enough to hurt."

The following moment the Boy Rancher felt the body of Dolores Dick tremble in the saddle. It swayed to and fro while the black horse rushed on, and at last Dick fell to one side, almost dragging his young captive to the ground with him.

Mustang Merle tore loose Dick's last grip on the black mane; he saw the outlaw sink down, and fixing himself firmly in the roomy saddle, he plied the horse with his heels and saying:

"Now for Mesquite or death!" sped like an arrow through the valley.

If he could not outstrip the three horsemen and get ahead of Captain Red Jacket, all was lost.

CHAPTER XVII

WIPE OUT.

NOT a foot of that region was unknown to Mustang Merle.

He had traversed it by day and by night and knew it in all its windings, therefore, he was not afraid of the shadows which threatened to lose him in the valley through which he was now racing for dear life.

He doubted not that Dolores Dick would fall into the hands of his enemies, and thought he had seen the handsome raider for the last time, and when he emerged from the valley and found himself upon better ground and out of the shadows, he turned to the right and rode straight for Mesquite.

It was not long before he discovered that his pursuers had left the valley and were thundering after him. It was now a race across the open country and Merle realized the danger of the chase.

Dolores Dick's horse, relieved of one-half of his burden, rushed on with renewed powers, and Merle saw, to his great joy, that he was gaining on the enemy, and that, if his horse held out, he would, in time, outstrip them.

Meantime the band led by Captain Red Jacket in person was pursuing its way across the country headed toward the boy's ranch.

If the king of raiders could have witnessed a part of the pursuit we have just described, he might have increased his gait in order to head off the young rancher who was riding for life and home.

In time, the three men in hot pursuit of Mustang Merle fell off one by one and at last the boy no longer heard their shouts, nor saw their forms rising and falling with the ground and swell.

"Now for it!" he cried, patting the heated neck of his steed. "We must reach Mesquite ahead of Captain Cussed. Everything depends on our doing this."

On, on went the horse, straining every nerve, as if he felt the need of such effort, and when Merle rode over a rise and looking down into the valley beneath saw a fire, his heart gave a great leap for joy and he with difficulty suppressed a cheer.

Pausing not a single second on the summit of the hill, he dashed forward again and was soon riding across the country straight for the fire.

A dozen men sprung up at the sound of his coming and he distinctly heard rifle-locks click on the night air.

The next moment Mustang Merle rode into full view and the men shouted for joy.

"Red Hawk is somewhar lookin' for you," cried Joe Bundy. "He said you disappeared almighty sudden an' he came back ter say this when off he went again."

In a few words Mustang Merle related his adventures and the men of Mesquite began to prepare for Captain Red Jacket.

By and by there sprung among them the lithe form of the young Apache, and seeing Merle he leaped forward with a shout of delight.

"They are out yonder," said Red Hawk pointing toward the West. "I have counted the wolves of the desert, and they have come to wipe us from the face of the earth."

Lona was placed in a spot considered safe and the brave spirits of the ranch waited for the charge which they felt would be made. They knew that at a given signal from their chief the bandits of the Tagus would rush upon the ranch, expecting to surprise and bewilder its defenders and finish the whole affair before much resistance could be made.

An hour of dead silence passed away and then the keen Red Hawk who had crawled toward where he had seen the raiders, came back and announced that all was ready for the swoop, that Captain Red Jacket and his border bandits were in the saddle and waited only for the signal.

Presently there came over the little hills that lay just beyond the temporary breastworks which the ranchmen had erected out of the half-burned logs of the old house, a sound which tightened every hand that gripped a Winchester.

It lasted for a moment and then changed into the steady tramp of steeds.

"Here they are!" whispered Mustang Merle. "Now, my boys, show this black vulture that there are some bones that he will never pick."

The horses came on moving gently over the ground until all at once the often heard whoop of the Red Jackets cleft the air. It had scarcely died away when the charge was made, and down upon the Mesquites with the fury of a storm came the line of raiders with pistols drawn and with yells that made the welkin ring.

The men behind the barricade did not stir. Not a word passed their lips, but they waited calmly for the signal which was to rise from their boy master's at the proper time.

On, on swept the raiders of the border, wondering, no doubt, why their yells were not answered with shots; they were now nearing the half-smothered fire and could see the barricades, but not a single ranchman.

All at once all this was changed.

A sound rose over the blackened logs. In an instant a sheet of fire swept the whole line and the charging column was staggered.

Horses pitched in every direction, men fell from their saddles, some to be trampled beneath the hoofs of the maddened steeds and others to be dragged from the scene, hanging from stirrups and shot through and through.

It was a scene of confusion never before witnessed in that part of the Southwest. Again and again the repeating rifles poured their deadly contents into the disordered ranks of the raiders, which broke under the withering fire and fell back without firing a dozen shots in reply.

After awhile the sharp eye of Old Joe Bundy saw something dark creeping toward the ranch.

He said nothing, but eyed it keenly, and when it had reached a spot near the house he brought his Winchester to bear upon it, and was about to fire when the hand of the young Indian encircled his wrist.

"I see it, too, brother," said the Apache, in low tones. "Let me watch the human panther."

Red Hawk sneaked away and disappeared.

There were those among the defenders of the ranch who wondered what movement was on foot, but they did not intercept the red-skin.

Red Hawk was soon outside, creeping toward the object which had crawled toward the house. He had the silent crawl of the wary lynx, and the look of the night-hawk.

The object had stopped, and was fitting something to a bow.

It was another arrow dipped in something inflammable, and the last attack of the raider band rushed across his mind, and he saw himself fighting the flames once more.

Red Hawk watched the dark thing on the ground until it came on again, keeping in the shadow of the trees and nearing the house by degrees.

"He shall not fire the house of my brother!" said he, under his breath. "Red Hawk has eyes like the young eagle, and his hands are eager to catch the foeman's throat."

Nearer and nearer came the creeper. He was almost within reach of the sinewy arms of the young Indian when all at once a sound which seemed a signal came over the ground.

The spy stopped and turned his head to listen. At that moment his face was turned from Red Hawk and a fatal neglect it proved.

The body of the lithe Apache shot forward like a shaft from a bow. It collided with the man on the ground and the two arose together. The Indian was uppermost when they went to earth a moment later and a brief struggle followed.

Suddenly but one person sprung up and that one ran back to the defenders of Mesquite. A minute afterward the figure of Red Hawk appeared among the ranches and something fell at their feet.

Joe Bundy stooped and picked it up. "I thought you'd git it, Red Hawk," he said, holding up to view a fresh scalp. "You couldn't refrain from liftin' his ha'r, could you?"

The young Apache looked, but made no reply.

"Look out! Here they come again!" cried a voice at this juncture, and the men sprung to the danger that menaced them.

Sure enough the Red Jackets were trying it once more; but they were met with a terrible volley as deadly as the others, and the loud cheer sent heavenward by the ranchers told that it had been successful.

"Once more, boys, and the day is ours!" shouted Joe Bundy. "No quarter to the Red Bravos of the Border!"

Back over the hills went the Red Jackets, their captain shouting himself hoarse as the victors could tell by the voice they heard above the roar of battle, but not a single raider drew rein until all had placed the hill between them and the camp of the ranchmen.

There Captain Cussed, mad with rage, seized one of his men and attempted to dash him to the ground, but he was caught in turn by another and torn from the saddle.

Not more than six of all that vicious band had ridden back from the scene of slaughter. Some of these were wounded, and their clothes cut by the bullet told how narrow had been their escape.

Captain Red Jacket attempted to rise, but was not able to do so and his men laughed bitterly and in derision when they saw that his foot was imprisoned in the stirrup and that he could not extricate it.

Led by Mustang Merle and mounted on the steeds of the ranch, which had been kept ready for emergency, the men of Mesquite now came forth from behind the barricade, and all at once the remnant of the raiders saw a flash of deadly flame light up the summit of the hill.

This broke them once more. In an instant they were on the run and with the charging ranchmen in hot pursuit.

To the left dashed a lone horse and Merle singled it out and rode after it.

He soon found that the furious animal was dragging something human in shape and he urged his own horse to greater speed.

The race was, for a long time, uncertain, but the boy's horse possessed the better mettle and at last he found himself bearing down on the animal ahead.

They were now in a beautiful piece of country entirely open and almost level. The brilliant starlight showed Merle the very flowers he was crushing in his eager race, but he gave them a hasty glance and sped on.

At length he came alongside the flying steed and saw the object still at the stirrup, bounding hither and thither over the ground and barely human in shape any longer.

The Boy Rancher leaned forward and clutched the bridle-rein of the mad steed. He held on like death and, although almost thrown from his seat several times, he succeeded in bringing him to a halt and then dismounted.

He cut the stirrup-strap and struck a match on the saddle. Holding the light over the bruised face which lay on the grass he looked for a second and then fell back with a cry.

Captain Red Jacket, the terror of the border—the tribute bandit of the Tagus, had collected his last tithe and lay dead under the feet of his own steed!

Mustang Merle held the match close to the face of the great outlaw and thought of the villainies he had committed; he thought, too, of plundered Mesquite and of the vengeance which had been taken, and then, remounting, rode after his men to tell them that the vulture would soar and swoop no more.

It was some time before the men of Mesquite returned from the chase. They did not want to

stop until they had entirely exterminated the Red Jackets of the border, and when they came together it was believed that all had perished and that Mesquite was safe for all time.

Morning came and showed Merle the full extent of his victory. It revealed the dark forms lying on the wet grass, and some one brought in Captain Cussed and laid him at the head of his men.

"It's what I'd call a wipe-out," remarked old Joe Bundy, looking at the dead on the field of their last battle. "They won't bother this part of the kentry no more. An' then, thar's Gray Eagle who won't come out o' the old mine till Gabriel calls him. As for Rustling Rob, if he keeps his distance, all will be well with him, but he would better not try any more games in these parts. Now, ef Dolores Dick was lyin' thar with the captain an' the rest, I reckon you'd feel entirely easy, eh, Merle?"

"I have the best of reasons for thinking that Dolores Dick fell dead from his saddle in the valley," answered the Boy Rancher.

Old Joe shook his head doubtfully.

"These fellows have more lives than a cat," said he. "Dolores Dick may turn up some of these days and bother us again. He hates you, Merle, because your mother refused to become Mrs. Dolores instead of marryin' your father, peace to his ashes. But, we'll go ahead an' rebuild Mesquite, an' see what thar is in that mine. We'll do this jest as if thar was no Dolores Dick ter think about. We needn't fear the Red Jacket Bravos; they're out thar on the grass. The hull band is wiped out unless—Well, I'll ride through the valley to-morrow an' see if Dick is still keepin' the trees company."

That day the rebuilding of Mesquite Ranch began. In time a handsome house arose where the old one had stood and Lona had a new home. But what pleased her most was the increasing friendship between Mustang Merle and Kyd, the young overseer. The youth had saved her life by discovering the mine to which Gray Eagle and Rustling Rob had taken her, and she owed him so much.

One day Merle came up to her on the porch and said with a smile:

"Kyd has told me all, Lona. But I am glad you are not going away. My ranch is large enough for another house just like this one, and Kyd has promised to stay."

The Pride of Mesquite blushed, and Merle turned laughingly away.

The lost mine turned out to be a startling bonanza, and Joe Bundy soon found himself a money king, and his herds dotted the green hill-sides just beyond Merle's ranch.

Red Hawk, the Apache, came often to the ranch, and was always sure of a hearty welcome, and there was no Captain Red Jacket to disturb this scene.

One summer day there appeared on the nearest hill, looking down upon Mesquite, a solitary horseman. Merle and Old Joe saw him at the same time. They saw him doff his white sombrero, and noticed that he had long hair of raven blackness. The stranger stood erect in his stirrups and waved his hat toward the ranch.

The next moment he was gone.

"He's as polite as ever," said Joe. "He just came back ter tell us that Dolores Dick is still on deck."

Here we take leave of our characters, but not for good, reader. The career of Mustang Merle is by no means finished, and we trust that in the near future we shall again meet him, with our old friends Joe Bundy, Red Hawk, and last, but not least, Dolores Dick, the long-haired Apollo of the Southwest Border.

Until then adieu.

THE END.

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